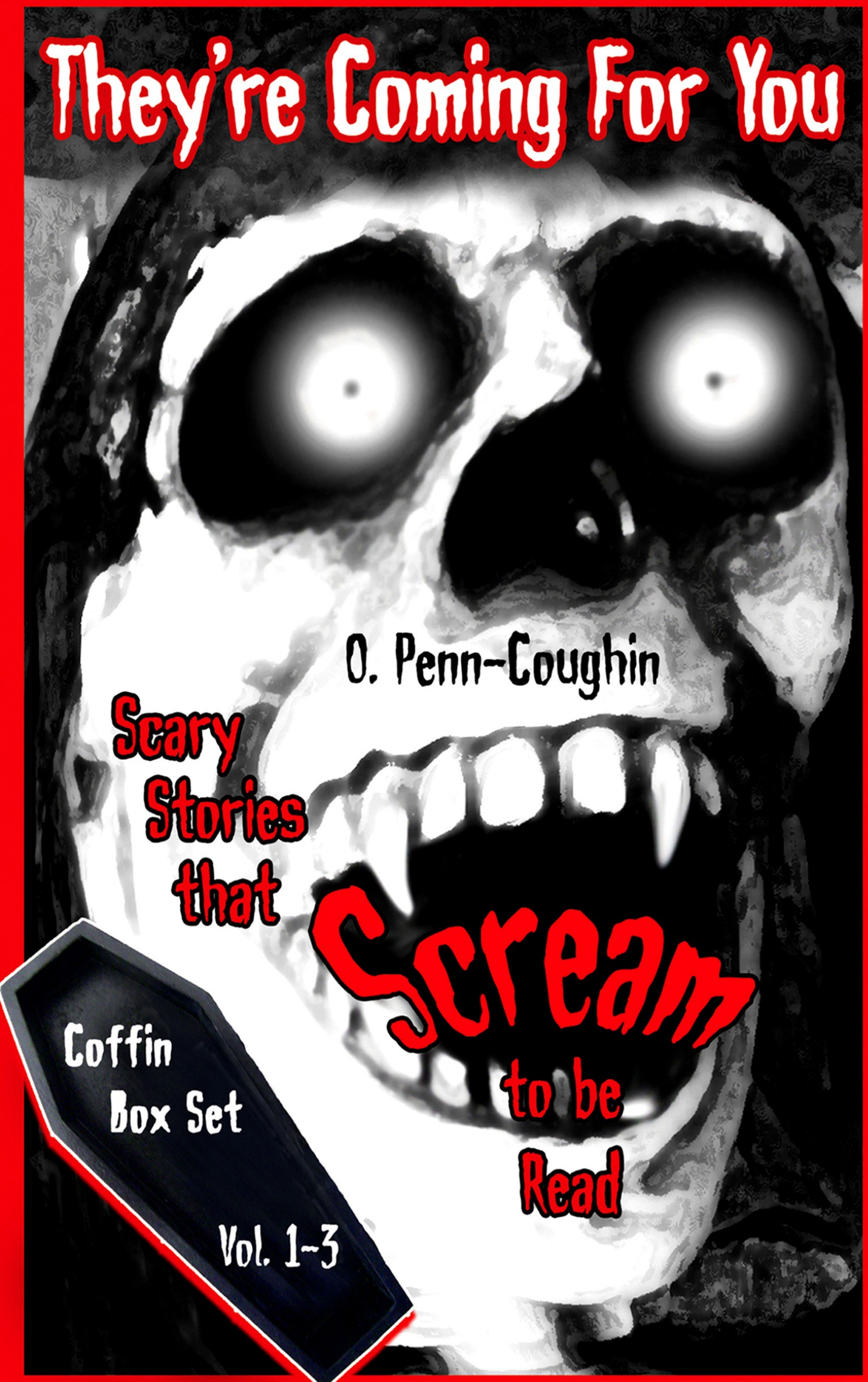
They're Coming For You



O. Penn-Coughin

Scary Stories that Scream to be Read

Coffin Box Set

Vol. 1-3

They're Coming For You Box Set, Vol. 1-3: Scary Stories that Scream to be Read

by

O. Penn-Coughin

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You Come Too Publishing

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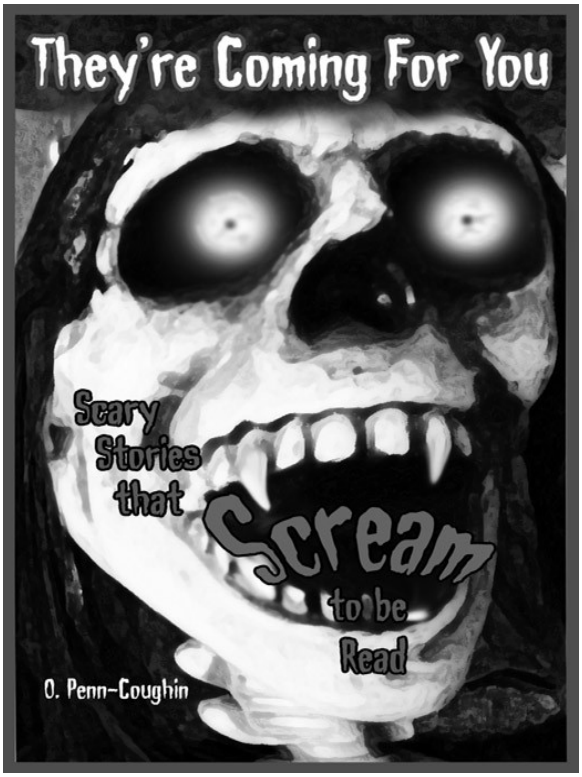
for my old students
and the young ghost of my father


They're Coming For You
Scary Stories that Scream to be Read
O. Penn-Coughin

Introduction

The stories in this book are meant to give you *chicken skin* (as they say in Hawaiian, Dutch, Chinese, and Spanish) and make you laugh, think, shiver, and scream. They can be read in the quiet horror of your own mind or in a group.

Several of the stories include read aloud instructions **[like this]**. And like most things, screaming takes practice. Sometimes it's good to pause at the end like it's over… and then let out an unexpected scream. Or you might want to scream near the beginning or the middle—just because. Other times you could really surprise your audience by having someone else do the yelling.

Some of my personal favorites in this collection involve the use of accents. It's awesome fun to try to sound like a pirate, Southern grave robber, dead pioneer woman, French-Canadian voyageur, Irish soccer fan, or street corner thug. You don't have to use the accents, but they do add a nice touch. And don't be scared of sounding foolish. It's all part of storytelling.

Finally, remember to set the mood by turning down the lights and reading slowly and in a low voice, just above a whisper, until it's time to… SCREAM!

O. Penn-Coughin

El Cuco

"El Cuco comes for children who don't listen to their parents," Juan told Little Johnny again as he kissed his son good night. "*El Cuco* comes for children who stay up past their bedtime. Be strong, my son. Be good."

It was the same story that Juan's father had told him when he was a child. Thousands and thousands of Spanish-speaking children went to bed each night with the story of *El Cuco*. But here in the United States of America you were not supposed to tell such things to little children. The counselors and psychologists said it was not healthy. And Juan's wife agreed.

"Juan, please stop telling him that cuckoo story," she said. "I don't want Little Johnny to have nightmares."

"Yes, dear," Juan said.

Juan loved his son very much and didn't want him to become a mama's boy, *un nene de mamá*. He knew the world was sometimes a cold, hard place and that Little Johnny would have to learn to be tough and hard too. He wanted him to be strong, strong on the inside. But Juan was losing the battle.

Little Johnny wasn't strong. He was soft and flabby and gooey on the inside. He was *un llorón de primera*. A world-class cry baby. Always crying to his mother about every little thing.

"*El Cuco* lives in that hole in the wall over there," Juan told Little Johnny the next night. "He waits for *niños malo* —bad children—and then he comes out for them. Be strong, my son. Be good."

A few minutes later, Little Johnny was knocking on his parent's bedroom door.

"Daddy told me the cuckoo would get me," he cried. "He said it would come out of the hole in the wall."

"Poor baby," his mother said, hugging Little Johnny tightly and giving Juan a dark look. "Silly Daddy will patch that hole and that mean cuckoo won't be able to get you."

The next morning Juan got his putty knife, mixed some plaster, and covered the little hole in the wall. He then painted over it, so that no one would ever be able to tell there had been a hole in the first place.

"The hole is gone," Juan told Little Johnny that night. "But *El Cuco* is still there. Be strong, my son. Be good."

"No, you said it lives in the hole and the hole is gone," Little Johnny said. "No more cuckoo."

"Be careful what you say," Juan warned. "The only way to keep *El Cuco* away is to be strong, to be good."

"Cuckoo all gone," Little Johnny teased as he jumped and danced on the bed. "Cuckoo can't get me. Cuckoo can't get me."

That night Little Johnny heard a muffled sound coming from inside the wall where the hole used to be.

"I'm coming for you, *niño malo*," a voice said.

There was scratching and pounding and pounding and scratching as plaster and dust and dust and plaster fell from the wall. Little Johnny was too scared to look, too scared to cry, too scared even to wet the bed.

"I don't like bad little boys," the voice said, now free from the wall. "You should have listened to your *papá*. *Pero es demasiado tarde ahora*. It's too late now.

"Oh, you know what else I don't like?" the voice whispered into Little Johnny's terrified ear. "I really don't like to be called cuckoo. My name is *El Cuco*!"

El Cuco opened up a large sack filled with other bad children and dropped Little Johnny inside.

Then he was gone.

The next morning Little Johnny was gone too. But the hole in the wall was back.

Welcome to the Neighborhood

Farewell Bend Cemetery was on the outskirts of town. It was a pioneer cemetery, and most of the graves were well over a hundred years old. Some of the people who had built the little town were buried there too, Mrs. Bunk had told the class. The graveyard was full of history.

The class of 28 fourth graders stood in front of the gates of the cemetery. This was one crazy field trip, Allen Rivers thought. And the trip over was crazy too. Because the cemetery was only a few blocks away from the school, the class had walked instead of taking a bus. They had to walk along the busy highway that cut through the middle of town, but they all made it to the cemetery safely.

Mrs. Bunk began to talk about the pioneers and all the hardships they went through on their journey out west, but Allen wasn't listening. He was getting his camera out of his backpack. His grandpa had given him an ancient camera last week and this would be a perfect place to try it out. It was even loaded with a roll of film, just like in the old days. He was excited that he would be able to use this creepy camera in this creepy place.

When Mrs. Bunk stopped talking, the kids were allowed to wander around and read the epitaphs. Allen ran through the cemetery like a wild horse, taking pictures of his classmates and yelling "look this way, this way" over and over again.

Then Allen ran up to a large, moss-covered tombstone where a girl was standing by herself.

"Hey," he yelled, "let me take your picture with that cool tombstone."

The girl didn't answer. He didn't recognize her, but maybe she was a new student. Or maybe she was visiting the cemetery with her parents.

"Don't be such a grump!" Allen said. "You might as well look this way." Click. "Ha! That will show you. I got your picture!"

The girl wore a somber expression and stared at Allen with large, black eyes. He backed away, but her hate-filled glare followed him. He then turned from her and ran, but he could still feel the girl's eyes on his back all the way across the cemetery. It wasn't until he got to the front gate and rejoined his friends that he felt those piercing eyes were finally off him. Sure enough, when he turned around, he saw that the girl was gone.

The students sat on the grass and ate lunch from brown paper bags. Allen nervously looked around for the new girl but couldn't find her anywhere. He was actually happy when Mrs. Bunk told them they were heading back to school. This place was giving him the creeps.

The class walked single file along the busy traffic of the highway. It was loud. Allen couldn't wait to give his mom the roll of film that he had finished and get his pictures developed. Maybe he could bring them to school the next day.

Suddenly the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. That strange girl in the cemetery—those dark, terrible eyes—he could sense her watching him again even though the graveyard was far behind them now.

A sick feeling flooded his stomach. Allen turned around, but she wasn't there. Still not convinced, he stepped out onto the road to get a better look.

The truck driver had no time to stop. Allen Rivers died instantly. Somehow the old camera survived the accident, landing in a nearby field.

Months later Allen's mother took the film in and had it developed. Although it was hard for her to look at the photographs of classmates posing and smiling in the graveyard, it did make her happy that Allen had a fun day. But then she came across the very last picture. She let out a tortured scream and then fainted on the spot.

Standing next to a large, mossy tombstone, a wraith-like little girl was staring straight into the camera with the most evil, dark eyes. But that wasn't the worst part. The worst part was that the tombstone read *Allen Rivers, Rest in Peace*.

RIP

Into the Woods

For years her dad would look out the kitchen window into the dark forest that was just past their backyard and say the same thing.

"Never, ever, ever go out into those woods alone." He snapped his head around toward Amy and stared at her with those black eyes. "Do you hear me? *Never*."

When she promised that she would never go there, he turned back to the window, lost in thought.

Most years Amy had never even thought about the woods. When she was younger she liked to jump on the trampoline and roller skate down their long driveway. When she was nine she liked to shoot hoops with her friends and go to sleepovers.

But now Amy was 11. She was 11 and she liked to think about things and sometimes be by herself. She really loved to draw and spent her weekends sketching. She was especially good at drawing flowers and trees and couldn't help thinking about all those giant trees in the woods.

One Saturday in April, her dad left Amy alone because he had to visit a sick friend who lived far away. He said he wouldn't be back until late and was gone when she woke up. After lunch she walked to the kitchen window and stared out.

"I'm not afraid of those woods," she said. Soon Amy had her art supplies and stood at the edge of the backyard, looking into the shady forest.

The deeper she went into the woods, the more beautiful the trees became. Eventually, Amy found a large boulder to sit on and started drawing. Time went by fast. Five or six pictures later, she glanced up and noticed the sun had grown hazy and soft and had fallen down low, peeking through only a few trees.

Although her dad wouldn't be back for a few hours, it was time for her to start back home. She packed up her pencils and jumped down from the rock.

As Amy walked through the forest, nothing looked familiar. The trees grew darker, becoming large silhouettes that surrounded her path. She started to worry. Everything looked the same and it felt like she was going in circles. Her mouth dried up and she was getting cold. She started to cry.

Suddenly a little boy came out from behind a tree. He was wearing muddy jeans and a large, dirty T-shirt. His pale face was the only brightness in the entire woods.

"Why are you crying?" he asked.

"I need to get home but I think I'm lost," she said. "Do you know where Stansbury Road is?"

"Take my hand," he said.

Amy took the boy's cold, little hand and they walked together through the dark forest. She had to walk slowly because his legs were so short. But she didn't mind. It was good to have some company.

"Have you been playing out here today?" she asked, remembering his dirty clothes.

"I've been out here all day," he said. "But not playing."

The boy seemed to know where he was going. Soon they saw a light in the distance.

"Yes!" Amy whispered in joy. "We must be close!"

She squeezed his little hand tighter as they walked toward the light. But as they got closer she saw that they had not come upon a house, but rather a bright lantern sitting near a mound of dirt.

There was a dark, sinister figure digging a hole in the ground. They walked up quietly, not getting too close.

"Hey," she whispered. "What's going on?"

The little boy was quiet, standing still. She looked at him and saw that his face was even whiter now, brilliantly shining against the darkness like a large harvest moon at midnight. Tears started falling from Amy's eyes again as the sound of the shovel hit the dirt in an eerie rhythm.

"Where did you bring me?" she asked**.**

"This is where *it* killed me," was all that the boy said before disappearing down into the very ground he was standing on.

Then the lantern went out, leaving Amy alone in the dark woods with *it.*

[Now SCREAM for your life!]

You Come Too

"Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid smelly ol' sub," Megan mumbled as she watched the other kids play outside.

Megan hated old, mean Mrs. Crankshaft because she was old and because she was mean. But mostly she hated her because she was smelly.

There were always bad things to smell at school: the lunch lady's awful offerings, the stench of those sweaty boys after recess, the kid whose underwear died last Tuesday without anyone bothering to bury it. The list went on and on.

But Mrs. Crankshaft took the cake when it came to bad smells. She took the cake and spread some nasty frosting all over it. Woo-wee!

That being the case, Megan thought it would be appropriate to make farting noises when the old woman walked by. She put the back part of her hand to her mouth and let one fly. A few of the kids giggled.

However, it seemed Mrs. Crankshaft still had some life in her because she spun around quickly, squinted right at Megan, and whispered, "You just won an all-expenses-paid trip to recess in here with me."

So Megan spent recess looking out the window and mumbling under her breath.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid smelly ol' sub," she said to herself over and over again. But the last time she said it, Mrs. Crankshaft interrupted her.

"What did you say, girl?"

Megan turned around to tell some lie but stopped. Mrs. Crankshaft was staring at her with small, terrible eyes. Then the eyes got as big as golf balls. And then they were gone. Suddenly Mrs. Crankshaft keeled over onto the desk face first.

An ambulance came to take the old woman away, followed by every counselor in a 50-mile radius, and then the kids were sent home early.

"Are you all right, Megan?" her mom asked later.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she said.

That night Megan woke up to the sound of the floor creaking. In the darkness of the bedroom, she could see her mom standing in the doorway.

"Mom, I told you I'm fine," she said. "I don't care about Mrs. Crankshaft. I just want to sleep."

Megan's mom didn't answer. Then, suddenly, the most horrible smell filled the room. It was that nasty frosting smell.

"Mom?" Megan said in a shaky voice.

The smell just grew stronger, and then the figure began to move towards the bed.

"I heard what you said, guuurl!" A muddy, dark voice gurgled. "Call for your mommy if you think it'll help!"

Megan tried to scream but gagged on the smell and the fear.

The next morning an ambulance came and took Megan away. She would be spending recess with the sub again. Mrs. Crankshaft had saved her a place right next to her at the morgue.

It's accent time. A pioneer twang perhaps. These people came from all over, so you pretty much can't miss.

Yo Mama's Right Here

The figure rose out of the water. The wet, black dress pressed in on her bony body. The tattered, black bonnet surrounded what had once been a face. Rotting, gray flesh with teeth and bone showing through. Empty, dark holes where the eyes used to be. Her hands reached out blindly for her dead child.

"Baby, come to meeeeee…" she moaned. "Yo mama's right heeeeeere."

With a scream, Jacob Brown woke up from his nightmare.

"Jacob, what's wrong?" his wife Mary asked.

"Bad dream is all," Jacob said, wiping the sweat off his face. "Get back to sleep now."

Tomorrow they would be crossing the Green River. Jacob always had trouble sleeping before crossings. To get an early start in the morning, the wagon train had camped near the river. Jacob could hear the sound of the dark water that was waiting for them.

"I would sooner rastle a bear than tangle with them waters," he thought.

But Jacob knew that if the family was going to get to the green farmlands of Oregon, they were going to have to cross this river. They had crossed others, and there would be more ahead.

He got up, pulled his boots on, and walked down to the river. Dawn still felt hours away. The moon did little to brighten the water or Jacob's troubled mind. After a while he walked back to the wagons.

In the morning a tired Jacob hitched the oxen to the wagon and smiled when he saw his three young children running around. Things were always better in the morning.

"Git on up here, you rascals," he told them. "It's time to go."

In the distance, dark clouds colored the sky. But overhead it was blue as the first wagons began to cross the river.

One behind the other, the heavy wagons moved slowly through the water, each making it safely to the other side. Finally it was their turn.

"Yaw!" Jacob shouted to the oxen. "Do work!"

By now the sky above had turned much darker and the water had begun to rise. The river was moving faster than when the first wagons crossed.

At first Jacob thought it was just his tired mind playing tricks on him. He could barely hear it above the noise of the rushing water.

"Baby, come to meeeeee…" it moaned softly. "Yo mama's right heeeeeere."

Jacob swallowed hard and continued to drive the team. The animals did their best, but to Jacob it felt like giant snails were pulling the wagon. The force of the water made it harder and harder to keep on course. It started to rain.

And then Jacob heard it again. She was closer and louder now, and Jacob had no doubt she was real.

"Baby, come to meeeeee…" she called again. "Yo mama's right heeeeeere."

Through chattering teeth, Jacob urged the team forward.

"Y-y-y-yaw!" he ordered in a shaky voice. "G-g-g-git going!"

The minutes seemed like hours, but through the now-pouring rain Jacob could see the shore ahead getting closer. He almost smiled at the thought that they would make it.

And then it happened. It happened just like in his dream.

Something rose out of the water right in front of the oxen. The wet, black dress pressed in on her bony body. The tattered, black bonnet surrounded what had once been a face. Rotting, gray flesh with teeth and bone showing through. Empty, dark holes where the eyes used to be. Hands reaching out blindly in front of her.

"Baby, come to meeeeee…" she moaned loudly. "Yo mama's right heeeeeere."

Suddenly, as Jacob screamed, the wagon hit a submerged boulder and rose in the air. Then, as Mary and the children screamed, the wagon tipped over. Jacob fell into the water and was carried downriver.

The last thing he saw before disappearing forever under the cold, black water was the woman floating above the wagon.

“Baby, come to meeeeee. Yo mama’s ri—”

[Now quickly shout: AAAH!]

***

Crossing rivers along the Oregon Trail was dangerous. Hundreds of pioneers drowned trying to cross the Kansas, North Platte, and Columbia Rivers—among others. In 1850 alone, 37 people drowned attempting to cross the Green River in Wyoming.

Little Plastic Guitar

Steve Reynolds had been resting in peace for more than 30 years now.

He had long ago given up on the dream of making it into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He knew his songs were not classics. He had just done the best he could. And he had some fun along the way. Sure, like any other ghost he had some regrets. Mostly he wished he had not been driving so fast that night—that *last* night.

"But what's done is done, son," he told himself.

Lately, though, Steve had been doing a lot of tossing and turning in his grave. Back in the other world, one of Steve's songs had been included in the latest version of the *Little Plastic Guitar Superstar* video game.

At first Steve was mildly excited by the news. But then kids all over the other world started disrespecting his song.

"That song smells worse than a room full of angry bleu cheese farts," French children moaned.

"Nastier than your hairy uncle's armpits," the youngsters of Uruguay groaned.

"Total Godzilla poop," Japanese kids intoned.

Steve did his best not to lose sleep over it. But the little stinkers were relentless. Eventually, Steve got pretty livid. Then Steve got extra livid.

He knew he didn't have enough pull to put a complete stop to his misery. But a friend of a friend of a friend had done a favor for a man who could arrange it so that Steve could teach one little kid a lesson he would not soon forget.

Steve waited for the next insult to come his way. As it turned out, he didn't have to wait too long...

"Don't eat all the candy at once," Dickie's mom shouted.

"I won't," Dickie shouted back with his pie hole full of candy as he fingered the little plastic guitar.

"Not this song again," Dickie groaned. "This song is pure *caca*."

Not long after beating the game on normal level, Dickie fell asleep. His numb fingers were still twitching as the drool ran down his chocolate-smeared face. And then he had the most terrible nightmare.

Dickie found himself in the game as part of the crowd. The band was playing the song—*that song*—and everyone, including Dickie, was loving it. He was like a puppet being controlled by someone else. Hard as he tried, he couldn't keep from pumping his fist into the air and shouting "YEAH! YEAH! YEAH!" over and over and over again.

It was hard to judge how much time had gone by, but it felt like hours.

"Wake up, wake up," Dickie whimpered as he slumped in his chair. "Make it stop. Just make it stop."

But Dickie couldn't wake up. And he couldn't make it stop. He was trapped. Trapped inside the game. Trapped inside that song. Trapped inside his little, screaming mind.

Cozy in his grave, Steve Reynolds was smiling. The little punk seemed to be having such an awful time that Steve figured there was no hurry in ending the nightmare anytime soon.

"Be cool, my man," he yawned. "Keep a rockin'."

He stretched his ghostly limbs and, for the first time since the game hit the stores, Steve slept like a baby.

Run for Your Life

Sarah hated her job at the mall. That was one reason she liked the track so much. By the time she finished a run, Sarah had usually forgotten about her idiot boss and all those annoying customers.

"The customer is always right," her boss would repeat. All Sarah knew was that sometimes they gave her a pain in the neck that was actually about two feet below her neck.

So every day after work, Sarah changed into her running clothes and shoes and drove over to the high school track near her home.

Another thing that was cool about the track was that few people used it. It was great to be outside and away from the crowds of the mall. But today was different.

Sarah was surprised to see more than 20 people going around in circles in the growing twilight. She was there a little later than usual because she had worked some extra hours.

"I guess it's more popular at this time," thought Sarah as she began warming up.

After a few laps, Sarah felt a sharp pain in her stomach. It was normal to have a few aches and pains at the beginning of a run. They usually just went away after a while. But this pain was getting worse. Then a terrible, burning burp came up Sarah's throat.

"That spaghetti sauce is trying to kill me," she said out loud, remembering what she had for lunch.

Sarah slowed down and began walking. For the first time since she arrived, she began looking closely at the people going around the track. They were all walking slowly, and they were all dressed in church clothes.

"What a bunch of freaks," Sarah thought.

She began to run again, but it was no use. The pain wouldn't let her. Sarah was now moving as slowly as the others.

Soon an old man in a brown suit started walking next to her. Sarah noticed that his face was very pale. But there was something strangely familiar about it.

"Saraaaaah," he said. "I have something to tell yooooouuu…"

Sarah stopped and began to ask him how he knew her name, but then as the old man turned to face her she saw that the other half of his face was completely eaten away.

Screaming, Sarah started running.

Forgetting about the pain, she ran as fast as she could. She ran to the parking lot. But her car wasn't there.

So she kept running. She ran and ran and ran. She finally looked over her shoulder, hoping that the old man wasn't somehow chasing her. There was no one there.

Sarah began to slow down, and then she saw her car up ahead in the middle of the street surrounded by a group of people. Suddenly she remembered who the old man's horrible face belonged to.

"Grandpa," she gasped. "But… he's been dead for 10 years."

The pain in her stomach came back stronger than ever as Sarah wobbled down the street.

She seemed to float past the crowd surrounding her car.

As she looked in through the cracked glass, Sarah saw herself. Her lifeless body was crushed under the steering wheel. Her eyes were open but saw nothing. And there was a dark, growing stain over her stomach that wasn't just spaghetti sauce.

Shot in the Gas Station

Chuck sat on the gas station toilet near the Montana-North Dakota border. He hated using these stinky public bathrooms as much as he hated using the ones at his school back in Oregon. But since his family was driving to visit his grandparents in Minnesota, Chuck didn't really have much choice. So there he sat on the silly tissue-paper seat cover, trying to hold his breath and make some sense of the primitive poetry on the stall walls at the same time.

"Here I sit broken hearted, paid a quarter and only..."

Suddenly Chuck felt a terrible pain cut through his left butt cheek. Water squirted out of his eyes and a voice he didn't recognize exploded from his throat. "Blast you, Cruzatte, you have shot me! You have SHOT ME!"

Chuck woke up on the cold, dirty tile floor, his mind separated from any sense of time or place. He thought he heard the sounds of a fiddle playing in the distance.

After a while Chuck reached down with his hand to check for damages, afraid of what he'd find. There was nothing there. And the pain was gone like the whole thing had never happened. Chuck got up slowly and shakily stumbled over to the sink. He washed his hands and wiped his tear-stained face. When he looked up, there in the mirror looking back at him was a bearded man with a patch over one eye wearing clothes made of animal fur. He smiled sheepishly through dirty teeth, a twinkle in his eye. And then he was gone.

"That was fast," his dad said sarcastically when Chuck finally made it back to the car. "You open up a bakery in there?"

A few miles down the road, Chuck's dad stopped the car at the historical display next to the highway.

To his astonishment, Chuck learned that the gas station had been built near the site where something astounding had happened 200 years earlier. It was close to the very spot where Pierre Cruzatte, the Lewis and Clark Expedition's one-eyed fiddle player, had accidentally shot Meriwether Lewis in the left buttock. It said that Lewis made a full recovery.

"All's well that ENDS well, eh, Chuck?" his father joked as his mom and little sister giggled. Pale as a ghost, Chuck felt his pants grow wet.

***

The historical aspects of this story are true. Lewis and Private Cruzatte were elk hunting at the time. At first Lewis thought Cruzatte—whose one good eye was not all that good—had shot him. Then he thought it must be Indians. Later Cruzatte denied having shot the captain. But Lewis found the bullet in his pants. It was the same type as Cruzatte had in his rifle.

One more thing: Since Lewis was the group's medic, he had to patch his painful wound himself. The man who helped him off with his pants was named Gass—Sergeant Patrick Gass.

It's time to pull out that French accent. Or if you want to get technical, that French-Canadian accent.

The Old Woman

Many years ago now, when I was a little boy, my grandfather he say to me this story.

Long before the railroad and the automobile and the jet plane, there was the canoe and the voyageurs. Transporting the beaver fur from the vast Canadian wilderness through dangerous rivers, windy lakes, and hungry mosquitoes was the work of the men of the north. My grandfather was one such man.

On this particular trip coming back down the river Churchill heavy with beaver skins, a new paddler he joined my grandfather's crew. Now Julien LeCoq he put his back into the long day of paddling and portaging and portaging and paddling. And the boss he say Julien LeCoq could run the rapids that would make other men go poo poo in their *pantalon*.

Still, the other men did not like Julien LeCoq. There was something about him, though what it was for sure *mon grand pere*, my grandfather, he could not say. Perhaps it was that he paddled silently, not singing like the other men. Or *se possible* it was the way he was always looking around with large, nervous eyes, like he was waiting for something to happen.

Nobody had ever seen eyes like the eyes of Julien LeCoq.

As the voyage she go on, Julien LeCoq began to act more and more bizarre. He stopped sleeping and began talking about *la vieille femme*, the old woman. Always *la vieille femme*.

"The old woman" was the name the voyageurs gave to the wind. You see, the wind she is the great enemy of the man who travels by canoe.

[Make wind sounds.]

One night Julien LeCoq began to whisper, "*La vieille femme vient pour moi. Le mort vient pour moi*. The old woman she is coming for me. Death she is coming for me."

And the next day Julien LeCoq he began to croon.

"*La vieille femme vient pour moi! Le mort vient pour moi!*" he sang in a high, shaky voice as he paddled. "The old woman she is coming for me. Death she is coming for me."

[Make wind sounds.]

The trip and Julien they continue in this fashion for many days and nights with the sleepless obsession of *la vieille femme*.

Finalement, finally you would say, one night the group is on a little island at the end of a huge lake and the wind she begin to blow with great anger. The lake was a terrible ocean of waves. It was useless to try and make the fire. The men they were happy to have a break from the mosquito and the black fly, but they were no so happy to have no hot food.

[Make wind sounds.]

One of the men, trying only to have a little fun, he say to Julien, "The old woman she is blowing tonight, no, Julien? The big lake is quite angry. Heh, heh, heh."

But Julien, his eyes all *rouge* — how you say? red — he fail to see the humor and threw himself on the man, screaming "*La vieille femme vient pour moi! Le mort vient pour moi!*" He would have killed that man if the others had not pulled him off.

My grandfather he did his best to calm down the poor fellow. He say to him, "*C'est seulement le vent*, Julien. It is only the wind."

But it was no use. Julien LeCoq he pulled away and ran into the woods behind the camp, screaming as he went.

"*La vieille femme vient pour moi! Le mort vient pour moi!* The old woman she is coming for meeeeee..."

And then his tortured voice it disappeared into the black night and the crying of the old woman.

[Make wind sounds.]

The next morning the wind she is gone and Julien he no return. The other men say, "Yoohoo, Julien? Where are you? Where are you hiding to? Yoohoo, Julien?"

Julien still he had to be on the little island. But after searching and searching, they could not find him.

And so the voyage she go on without Julien LeCoq.

The voyageurs paddled all day to cross the giant lake, not even stopping once to smoke the pipe. As they were approaching the far shore, each man thought he could hear the whispering of Julien LeCoq. It was only their imagination. That is what they say to themselves.

"*La vieille femme vient pour moi. Le mort vient pour moi*."

[Make wind sounds.]

And then they saw him — or what was left of him — sitting against a big rock. The unforgettable eyes staring out at the sky, staring out from the skeleton of Julien LeCoq! All that was left were those eyes still in the skull and the bones, bones burned and black as the night.

There was no sign of a campfire, and there was no explanation for how Julien LeCoq could have crossed that gigantic lake.

Though exhausted, the men paddled long into the darkness that silent night. Through all the miles and all the years after that, my grandfather he was never able to forget the song of Julien LeCoq.

"*La vieille femme vient pour moi. Le mort vient pour moi*."

Listen. Do you not hear?

The old woman she is dancing tonight.

[Make wind sounds.]

La vieille femme vient pour moi…

[Make wind sounds.]

[Suddenly turn to someone and shout…]

*Et pour **VOUS!***

This one should be told in an Irish accent. If your brogue fails you, try for a pirate.

The Ghost of Jimmie

There was an old football field on the east side of Killarney that was said to be haunted. Nobody wanted to play there. The local lads always won because the visiting players spent all their time worrying about seeing the ghost of Jimmie Concannon or, what was almost as bad, actually seeing the ghost of Jimmie Concannon. By the time the game started, them pitiful lads were as sick as a small hospital and so worked up that even their lunches ran a screamin' out of their bodies through the nearest exit, if you know what I mean.

As for why Jimmie Concannon haunted this particular field, nobody knew. Or if they did, they weren't wagging their chins about it. Not to speak ill of the dead, but poor Jimmie was the worst football player that ever was. It was said he was so feeble, he couldn't find a green crayon in a box full of green crayons. So maybe he was just trying to get in some extra practice, is all.

In any case, on this one fierce Saturday afternoon in October, it was, the wind was having its way with the dyin' leaves and there's a game afoot and a brave little striker is dribbling the ball down all by his lonesome with only the keeper to beat when suddenly he sees the ghost of Jimmie Concannon, all white and bony he, still in his uni, flesh a droppin' off his face, screaming for the ball.

"I'm open! I'm oooooooopen!" Jimmie wails, shaking his bony arms in the air. "I'm ooooooopen!"

Well, that brave lad's backbone turns to potato soup, it does, and he forgets about the ball and the goal and the fact that Macgillycuddy's Reeks are the tallest mountains in all of Ireland—and come to think of it, wouldn't it be lovely to be takin' a stroll among the clover there right about now, don't you know—and that lad, why, he turns white as, well, he turns white as Jimmy is what he turns, and faints right there on the edge of the goal box.

The following week another brave little lad from a neighborin' brave little county is driving in on net, keeping his head down, hoping against hope not to lose his nerve, when there appears Jimmy again, all white and bony he, with a snake where his tongue should be, up to his usual shenanigans, yelling for the ball.

"I'm open! I'm oooooooopen!" he moans, pointing to the spot on the ground in front of his left boot. "I'm oooooooopen!"

Well, that brave lad's legs turn to cabbage stew, they do, and he forgets about the ball and the goal and the fact that Mary had a little lamb—and come to think of it, no one has seen that lamb since McSorley opened his restaurant, don't you know—and that lad, why, his hair turns white as, well, it turns as white as Jimmie is what it turns, and he drops to the pitch and curls up like a wee little baby, he does, cryin' for his mother.

So on the last game of the season, it comes down to this for all the potatoes, and the score be tied at nil with time a dyin', and here comes this brave lad from another brave little part of the Emerald Isle and, Saints preserve us, if that's not the ghost of Jimmie Concannon standing there, right there to the left of the keeper, all white and bony he, except for the blood-red hair, and he's a callin' for the ball.

"I'm open! I'm oooooooopen!" he groans, a most terrible look in his eye. "I'm oooooooopen!"

Well, that brave lad's heart turns harder than Mrs. O'Leary's week-old soda bread, it does, and he stays focused on the ball and the goal and the fact that shots never taken never find the back o' the net—and come to think of it, wouldn't it be glorious to score in the last minute of play and do a wee little jig for all to see, don't you know—and that brave lad, why, he shoots and... He SCORES!

Ah, 'twas a bleedin'-bloody-brilliant thing to behold, it was.

Shortly thereafter, the referee blows his whistle three times, and it's all over. As the broken-hearted crowd departs the stadium, now a silent graveyard of dead dreams, the only sounds heard are the whoopin' and a hollerin' of the visiting lads as they jump up and down in the middle of the pitch. And Jimmie, poor Jimmie, not at all pleased, is still haunting our hero.

"I was open!" Jimmie cries, cryin' big worm-green tears. "I was oooooooopen! Why did you not pass me the ball, you rotten toadstooooooool?"

"Calm yourself, Jimmie," the lad says with a smile in his voice. "I would have gladly passed you the ball, but you were clearly *offside*."

[*Alternate Ending*:]

"Calm yourself, Jimmie," the lad says with a smile in his voice. "I would have gladly passed you the ball, but I was too scared."

"Scared of meeeeeee?" Jimmie sobs.

"No," the lad says shaking his head. "Scared that you'd miss."

BAD snOMEN

"A snowman doesn't have blood coming out of its eyes," Mr. White had said with disgust in his voice. "What were you thinking?"

Having recently arrived from Panama, what 7-year-old Carlos was thinking was that he had never seen snow, let alone a snowman. He was also wondering why he had to stay in at recess to write a letter of apology for drawing a green-haired, red-eyed snowman. But his mother had said to listen to the teacher, so the young boy didn't complain and wrote his little letter as best he could.

"mi sorry mi make A BAD snOMEN," it said. "it NO will hapen aGen nOw."

Mr. White threw the letter down on his desk and shook his head. At least it was Friday, he thought.

That day was the last time anyone at the school saw Mr. White. Over the weekend there was a horrible skiing accident. Going full speed, Mr. White flew over a hill and crashed almost halfway up a tree. Branches as sharp as knives punctured both eyes, killing him instantly.

Early Monday morning a scream came from Mr. White's empty room. The other teachers found the principal passed out on the floor by the teacher's desk. In one hand she held the drawing. In the other, the little boy's warning.

Checked Out

It was a big, cold house with no television. But Raven's mom always said the same thing.

"Just for an hour. We need to visit Aunt Ruby."

Lately, Aunt Ruby stayed in bed upstairs during the visits. After a little while, her mom would tell Raven to wait downstairs in the library.

The library was large and dusty, with a stench of old, rotting wood. Raven would listen to her music, play with her pocket video game, and hope for the time to tick by quickly.

But one day she began looking at the books on the shelves. She hadn't ever paid much attention to them before and now noticed that they all looked the same, with brown leather covers and gold titles. There were hundreds and hundreds of them that lined three walls of the room. She had heard of some of the books, like *Moby Dick* and *The Great Gatsby*. But as tunes blasted in her ears, she came across one rather strange book on the bottom shelf. She pulled it out.

It looked exactly like the other books, like it had been there for centuries. But the title was different.

Raven Wilson. That was her name! She took the book over to a large chair and opened it. Turning off her music, she started reading the typed print.

October 16: *Raven is born.*

She flipped ahead a little.

April 17: *Grandma dies and Raven pretends to be sad.*

"Hey, who wrote this?" Raven whispered to the book. A queasy feeling washed over her. She turned the page and kept reading.

September 22: *Raven breaks lil' Andre's crayons in half. When he starts to cry, she tells him he should be happy because now he has twice as many as before.*

May 29: *Raven gets mad and throws her mom's favorite Nina Simone record on the roof.*

Raven dropped the book into her lap. She was now sweating in the cold house, sweating and feeling like her heart was about to explode because it was pounding so hard. How did anybody know about any of this, and why were they writing it down in a book? Was it Aunt Ruby?

Raven gasped out loud when her mom called from upstairs.

"We're leaving in ten minutes."

Raven felt sweet relief. She had to get out of this house. She turned to the last entry.

January 22: *Raven's mom tells her that they'll be leaving Aunt Ruby's house in ten minutes.*

"How did that happen?" she said, her eyes darting around the room. She looked down again at the last page. But now new words had appeared. Her blood turned into a raging river of ice-cold terror and she started shivering.

January 22: *It's coming for her.*

"Ahhhhhhh!" Raven screamed in her mind.

She tried to get up and run for the door but her legs were petrified. Fear gripped her completely. She thought she now heard strange breathing fill the room. But all Raven could do was sit in the chair and look down in horror at the final entry as an ominous shadow crept across the book.

January 22: *They will never hear her screams.*

And they didn't.

[Now pause as if the story's over. Then let out a very unexpected SCREAM!]

Some sort of Southern accent will do here.

Buried Treasure

The South Will Rise Again Cemetery didn't pay Joe much for doing its dirty work. So Joe supplemented his income in the usual way.

It was nasty work digging those holes and filling them again. Joe told himself it wasn't really stealing because those people didn't need their rings, bracelets, necklaces, and watches anymore. They especially didn't need the watches.

"Time's up, suckas," he would whisper to the corpses as he helped himself to their belongings.

On this particular late afternoon, Joe—like the sky above—was in a black and dirty mood because "*maybees* you can't judge no book by 'is cover but you can sure as donkey doo judge a dead man's coin by his box."

In other words, Joe knew that the probability of finding something of value under one of these inexpensive pine lids was about the same as his chances of winning the lottery. Still, he looked. And to his amazement, the peaceful-looking old man inside the plain, pine coffin had a thick and shiny gold ring on the wrinkled and bony pinky of his right hand.

"Now, grandpa, what you gonna need this here ring fur?" Joe wheezed as he balanced himself on his knees above the old man's open casket.

Joe gave the ring a good tug but nothing happened. So he pulled harder. Again, nothing. The third time he yanked so hard that he lost his balance and fell on top of the old man. Joe's hot, sweaty face squished up against the corpse's cold, dead cheek.

"Get away!" Joe shouted, eyes a bulgin', pushing himself up quickly. "Now you gone and made me mad. Playtime's ovah!"

Joe held onto the ring with both hands, pressed a boot down on the old man's wrist, and pulled so hard he accidentally let out some gas. The ring came off.

But so did the old man's finger!

It flew through the air, end over end, landing among the tombstones.

Joe pocketed the ring and closed the lid—not noticing or caring that the old man had lost his peaceful expression. It had begun to rain and the wind blew through the decaying autumn leaves, sending a chill through Joe's moist and smelly T-shirt. Joe spent all of two seconds looking for the finger but couldn't find it in the dying afternoon light.

"Looky like Rat Christmas come early this year," he said.

He moved the mound of dirt into the hole till there was a hole no more. Then he put on his jacket and started for home. The chubby raindrops got chubbier and the wind blew harder. Joe walked faster and pulled his collar tighter.

By the time he reached his dark and dusty house, Joe was cold through and through. He took a long shower and let the hot water bring back the feeling in his bones. Then he opened a big can of gumbo and ate it steaming right out of the pot. He turned on the college football game on his big screen.

An entire pecan pie helped Joe forget about the storm, still raging outside. He had almost forgotten about the ring too.

"Thet's right," he slurred with gumbo and pie crumbs stuck to his chin. "Thet's right."

Then the doorbell rang.

"Who be out there on a night like this?" Joe said. "Take your dumb self far away from here."

The doorbell rang again. And again. Finally Joe got up, scratched his bulging belly, and cursed all the way to the door. There was no one there. The wild wind blew the roly-poly raindrops into Joe's face, reminding him why he didn't want to open the door in the first place.

Joe closed the door and went back to the game. But the storm had knocked out the power. Joe was too tired to care. He stumbled down the hall and got into bed.

Outside the rain and wind were now joined by thunder and lightning. And somewhere beyond the storm, a voice began calling. It was an old voice. And it was angry.

"Give me my finger. Give me my fin-geeeeeeer," it moaned.

Inside, Joe was too tired to hear. At first.

"I said I want my fin-geeeeeeer," it wailed, louder now.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Joe said. “I thought I told you to take your dumb self far away from here.”

The wind blew harder than ever and the now big, ol’, fat-as-beignet raindrops beat on Joe's door like one of those dead classic rock drummers and the old man's voice wailed, "Now you made ME mad!"

And Joe's eyes got as big as alligator eggs and he shivered, "Somebody save me."

Then the storm suddenly stopped. Just stopped like someone had flipped a switch or something. It was now as quiet as the grave—something Joe knew about. But a few minutes later, the voice was back and meaner than a sunburned water moccasin and so close Joe could smell the old man's putrid crawfish breath.

"I said I want my FINGER!" it hissed and Joe, who already had the covers pulled over his head, was so scared out of his dim wits that he fainted right then and there in bed before he could call out, “Somebody save me.”

The next morning Joe woke up with his finger in his nose. He didn't remember putting it there. But that wasn't all that unusual. (When you're in the buried treasure business, it's hard to turn it off sometimes.) He had a pain behind the eyes but was glad the nightmare had been just that: a nightmare.

Joe picked his nose for a good long while, squinting up at the ceiling, and finally pulled his hand away from his face.

Horror-struck, he realized that both his hands were already down on the bed. Then he looked at his favorite nose-picking hand. There was only a white, bloody stump where his pinky should have been.

With his severed finger still wiggling around in his nose, Joe ran screaming out into the street in just his underwear.

In a stuffy-nose voice he just kept shouting, “Somebody save me! Somebody save me! Somebody save me!”

The Man in the Box

The last thing I remember is being out in a field with the wind and sun hitting my face. And then nothing. No memory, only darkness.

I don't know how long I've been in this box. It is as dark as the grave in here and impossible to breathe.

At least I am not alone. My eyes are useless but I can feel others in here and smell their sick, sweet, banana-maple fear. In the blackness I hear their voices.

One of them keeps saying how you don't want to leave this box. He must be crazy. I dream about it every night: getting out, getting out, getting out.

"Escape is death and death is escape," he repeats, making no sense that I can see. Of course, I cannot see anything.

He whispers that he has heard the cries of the victims when the end comes.

"The sound of thick water, gasping, and screams," the voice screeches. "The killer uses a giant shovel and then the lights go out... *forever*."

"I don't want to die! I don't want to die!" I hear the screaming coming from inside my head.

Suddenly everything starts to shake and at first I'm afraid that it's an earthquake and then, yes, it has to be an earthquake and maybe, just maybe, if it's a big one and I survive, maybe some way, somehow I'll be thrown clear and... escape!

And then I see the light. The light! The wonderful, glorious light! And I am filled with fear and joy and joy and joy and shaking and then I hear the thunder speak.

"BREAKFAST, MIKEY. I GOT YOU YOUR FAVORITE CEREAL!!!"

Eyes drowning in white light, lungs in white water, my scream is lost among so many. I see the shovel now coming toward me and close my eyes. And close my eyes...

Whenever I read this story in front of an audience, I have people tell me I sound like George López. That might be something to shoot for when you're reading it. Or not.

The Clown from Down Under

Elmer Rodríguez was one hard, little hombre. He never smiled. Never laughed. Always looking like his dog had just died—and so what if it had, what business was it of yours? I mean little dude was harder than getting up early on Sunday morning.

Elmer wasn't afraid of the teacher or the principal or those crazy *cholos* with the prison tattoos he had to pass every day on his way home. He wasn't even scared of getting beat up by the sixth graders.

There was only one thing the little eight-year-old was afraid of. And that thing came around once a year, every year.

For some reason, Elmer Rodríguez was scared lily white of clowns.

Sure, a lot of kids are scared of clowns. Nothing special in that. But Elmer was different. Clowns swallowed all the oxygen in a room and drained his heart of all its blood. He was so terrified that his family had to stay away from the most popular fast-food joints because of the clowns.

In kindergarten he had even fainted when a clown came out to the school during the yearly fire safety assembly. All the clown had done was smile.

But that's all it took: one look at that ear-to-ear, painted-on smile left Elmer's lungs sucking for air and the room spinning.

It was the same time the following year—although Elmer hadn't learned how calendars worked yet—when the clown reappeared. The little boy took deep breaths. One after another.

The children laughed nervously and the teachers laughed through their bottom teeth the way adults do when something's not really *chistoso*. The laughter echoed through the school as the clown's smile cut into Elmer's soul like a rusty razor.

"*El payaso, no.* Not the clown," Elmer whispered over and over again, squeezing his eyes so tight that fat tears spilled down his bloodless cheeks. *"El payaso, no."*

Speaking of fat, that clown was one *nacho grande*. And he wasn't even a real clown. He was just a fireman dressed up as a clown. Not that anyone would feel safe in case of a fire with this lard-haulin' *panzón* around. Except for the donuts, maybe.

At the next assembly, when he was in the second grade, Elmer could have sworn that the clown looked right at him and mouthed, *"Hola, amigo."* Elmer could see the clown's crooked yellow teeth smiling at him as its eyes danced like skeletons on *El dia de los muertos*. Those eyes were alive with evil and looking right at Elmer, burning a hole inside him that would always smolder.

As the years went by, Elmer wondered why the fire department would use a clown. What did clowns have to do with safety or fires or anything anyway? What did clowns have to do with anything except fear and evil and scaring poor little kids out of their minds?

When he was in the third grade, Elmer finally made up his mind that he would put an end to it. He stopped at a church before school to ask for help and forgiveness for what he was about to do.

As he got to school, Elmer saw the big red fire truck parked outside, and he knew that this was the day. His calendar skills had improved. When the clown started talking during the assembly, Elmer looked down and played nervously with his backpack.

Suddenly Elmer stood up and shouted "*No más, payaso*! No more!"

He then pulled something out of the backpack. Holding his breath, Elmer hurled a holy water-filled balloon at the clown and scored a direct hit on the thing's face. Splash!

The principal looked at Elmer's teacher like someone had cut a real nasty one and the teacher reached over and grabbed Elmer hard by the wrist.

"What in…!" the teacher yelled but then stopped when she heard a loud gasp coming from the crowd.

In front of that entire gym full of kids, the clown burst into flames. The other firefighters emptied their extinguishers, but the flames just kept growing until the smell of burning clown filled the air. The make-up, the

red plastic hair and red rubber nose, the big floppy shoes, the sweaty, smelly costume, and the thing's flesh all started to blur together.

The clown laughed at first but seemed to lose its sense of humor after the smile melted off its face.

"*Orale, pues.* All righty then. I'll be waiting for you down there, my little *vato*," it said in a low, threatening voice. "*Te espero, Elmer, eh?* I'll be waiting..."

And then it was gone. A smoking, black stain on the gym floor was all that remained.

No one—including Elmer—was sure what had happened. The only thing Elmer knew was that he never wanted to see that clown again. He promised himself that from then on he would be good. Very, very good. *Muy, muy bueno.*

The Delicious Death of Jay Whitebread

Jay Whitebread was a writer of children's books. His specialty was scary stories. He was very popular with parents and teachers and that whole army of kids who said they liked scary stories just as long as they weren't *too* scary.

Jay Whitebread was their man.

He wrote them long and boring. It was like he had designed an amusement park full of roller coasters that just sat there. No one had nightmares and everyone went along for the ride.

On this one not-too-spooky night, Jay Whitebread was rewriting an old story about a woman who always wore a velvet ribbon around her neck. She never took it off. One night while the woman slept, her husband—who just couldn't stand it any longer—removed the ribbon. The story was supposed to end with the woman's head coming off and rolling onto the floor.

But Jay Whitebread thought that was much too violent. What would teachers say? What would parents do when their children woke up crying in the middle of the night? No, no, no. The head coming off just wouldn't do. So he changed the ending.

Jay Whitebread kept the woman's head attached. When the husband took off the velvet ribbon, all that happened was the wife waking up and saying, "Boo."

No nightmares there. A few more stories like that and Jay Whitebread would soon have another soft batch ready to send off to his publisher.

Inside his big mansion on the hill, Jay Whitebread rewarded himself with a little cup of vanilla ice cream and sat in his big leather chair in front of one of his five fireplaces, looking very pleased with himself.

Suddenly there was crazy laughter coming from the chimney and a pound-pound-pounding as if something was making its way down toward the fireplace. Standing now, Jay Whitebread dropped his little cup of vanilla ice cream when he saw what it was.

Out of the fireplace and onto the floor rolled the head of the woman from Jay Whitebread's story.

"You don't scare nobody, Mr. Writer!" it cackled, rising off the ground. "Maybe you should write romance novels!"

The head floated closer and closer to Jay Whitebread's terrified face. From just a few inches away, it looked into his eyes and whispered, "Hey, you're kinda cute."

The head then closed its eyes, opened its mouth, and kissed Jay Whitebread on the lips.

Jay Whitebread turned as white as his vanilla ice cream and dropped dead. From outside the mansion, hideous cackling—and typing—could be heard long into the night.

Ghost Dogs

"On nights like these the dogs come out and take their revenge," Larry told the other two boys as they sat around the campfire. "That's what some of the old Indians say, anyway."

The three friends were squeezing in one more backpacking trip before going back to school. A freezing wind blew in off the river, blowing smoke and embers everywhere. The full moon disappeared behind some clouds.

Larry, who was a little older, had just finished telling the yawning Dixon brothers about how the men of the Lewis and Clark expedition barely survived their trip through the Bitterroot Mountains of Idaho. Half-frozen and half-starving, the Corps of Discovery stumbled into a Nez Perce village just in time.

The Indians shared their salmon and roots with the travelers. But after stuffing themselves, the explorers got picky.

As they made their way down the Columbia River, Lewis and Clark would stop at every village along the way and trade the Native Americans for their dogs. All the Indians could do was shake their heads at these very strange strangers.

"Surrounded by all that delicious, pink salmon flesh and these guys ate dogs," Larry said. "You can understand why the ghosts of Spot, Fido, and Lassie might be a wee bit upset."

The brothers weren't sure if they should believe Larry, even though he was the history nerd of the group.

"Nah-uh," Simon was about to say when something wet and cold licked his nose. It had started to snow. Big, heavy flakes fell from the September night, a little early for snow but the mountains are like that.

"'Night, losers," Larry called to the brothers as they went in their tent.

A few minutes later Simon was sleeping like a smelly baby, and in the other tent Larry was snoring up a storm of his own. Meanwhile, Danny shivered inside his cheap sleeping bag and wondered if he'd ever be able to get warm.

Sometime during the night—he couldn't tell how much time had gone by or if he'd slept at all—Danny heard what sounded like dogs howling. Or was it the wind and his tired mind playing tricks on him?

But a few minutes later, there it was again, louder and closer. He heard the howling just as clearly as he heard Larry snoring a few feet away. The dogs—or whatever it was—made a sad, mournful sound.

Through it all, Simon kept sleeping and Danny was once again amazed at how his brother could snooze through anything. The snow kept falling, sticking to the tent until it got too heavy and then rolling off in clumps. Danny poked his head out but didn't see anything except for all that snow.

At some point, Danny passed out and finally slept. He could still hear the dogs in his dreams.

The next morning a half foot of soft snow covered everything. Danny got up first and then Simon. Larry had finally stopped snoring.

"That was some dumb, boring story Larry was trying to sell us last night, huh?" Simon said, stretching.

The brothers had breakfast and packed up their gear. But Larry still hadn't gotten up.

"Hey, Sleeping Beauty, time to get a move on," Simon said finally. Danny threw a snowball at Larry's tent. And then he noticed that the snow around the bottom of the tent wasn't white. It was dark. Red even.

Worried now, Danny stuck his head inside the tent. Larry looked like he had been ripped apart by wolves. Or dogs. What was left of him looked like the pink salmon flesh he had talked about the night before. There was animal hair mixed in with everything too.

Danny screamed and then Simon looked in the tent and he screamed too. And then they screamed together. And then they screamed some more. It would take a lot more screaming before the brothers realized that there weren't any animal tracks anywhere near Larry's tent. All that soft, fresh snow and not one single paw print.

The boys just kept screaming.

[Now scream. Hopefully your listeners will join you. Just keep screaming together, or alone. Just keep screaming…]

***

Larry's account of the Lewis and Clark expedition is true. The explorers really did prefer to eat dog meat rather than fish, even though they were in the salmon capital of the world. They also preferred dog meat to horsemeat, which they were forced to eat sometimes.

By the way, cases of wolves attacking humans are quite rare. A healthy wild wolf has not killed anyone in the United States in the last 50 years. Dogs, on the other hand, killed 32 Americans in 2007 alone.

A Real Bad Burrito

Jim felt himself floating above the overturned car. Even as it still slid down the black icy road, he could somehow see the driver through the twisted metal and broken glass. At first Jim couldn't see the dead man's face. But then the corpse slowly turned its head, opened its eyes, and stared straight up at Jim. Through the fog in his mind, Jim recognized the face. It was his face.

"Aaaah!"

Jim woke up screaming, his pillow wet under his head. He inhaled deeply and let the fact sink in that it had only been a dream.

"Okay, no more midnight burritos for you, buddy," he told himself. But the nightmare had been too real to laugh away. As he stood at the top of the stairs, Jim made a decision. "Maybe it was a warning. Maybe the dream was trying to tell me I shouldn't drive into town today."

Jim didn't see his toddler's toy car on the second step. Suddenly he lost his balance and began tumbling down the stairs. He didn't stop till he reached the bottom. By then it was too late. Jim's neck was twisted in a way necks are not supposed to twist. His lifeless eyes stared out into space, seeing only emptiness.

Next to his body, the overturned toy car was still spinning.

Pumpkin Eye

By the time they made it out to the pumpkin patch, the sun was low in the sky.

"I can't wait to tell the kids at school about this," said María as she squeezed the large, yellow flashlight she had brought from her garage.

"Yeah, this will be cool," said Adriana. They both had backpacks filled with blankets, snacks, and cameras. It might be a long night and they were ready.

The pumpkin patch was out in the country, surrounded by cornfields and next to an old, rickety house that was barely standing. Few people came out here anymore—not since the slick, new pumpkin patch, complete with free hay rides and hot cider, opened on the other side of town.

But María and Adriana weren't there to buy a pumpkin. They were there to see the ghost of Robby Bligh, a teenager who had died in that very field over 20 years ago. According to the stories, Robby could be seen haunting the patch during autumn nights.

Nobody was around, except for the pumpkins. It was quiet and cold as the sun disappeared. The girls could see their foggy breaths hang in the air when they whispered to each other.

"Ready here," María said, pressing buttons on the video camera she had borrowed from her mom. "Now that Robby just needs to show and we'll be Internet stars, girl!"

Adriana laughed.

"Did you hear that?" Adriana whispered.

The distant sound of dry leaves crunching pierced the still night. As a matter of fact, María had heard it too and her arms turned all chicken skin.

"Someone's coming this way, but I don't see anyone," María said.

"Someone or *something*," said Adriana.

The sound grew louder as the two girls stared into the darkness, their hearts beating crazy hard. Something was walking right toward them. Suddenly they could see a tall, thin figure just a few feet away. Then, to their horror, it spoke.

"Ooohhhhhhhhhhh."

The voice sounded old and hollow and the girls screamed and took off running. The footsteps followed them, and the girls could swear they heard Robby Bligh at their heels, yelling out to them, angry and seeking revenge.

"Don't run! Don't ruuuuuun!"

But María and Adriana ran like a five-legged puma. They ran and ran until María let out a terrifying, horrible scream and disappeared from Adriana's side. Adriana stopped and turned around, desperately calling and looking for her friend, but couldn't find her. María had disappeared.

Adriana ran all the way home and told her parents what had happened. Later when the paramedics found María lying in the dirt, an old, thin man was with her.

"I live in the house over yonder and this here's my pumpkin patch," the old man explained to the paramedics as they were putting a bandage around María's bloody head.

"I tried to tell them youngsters not to run in the pumpkin patch, that it's dangerous, but they took off anyway."

He cleared the old-man phlegm from his throat.

"You know, that's how that fella Robby Bligh died out here some years back. He was running through the pumpkins and tripped and fell head first right into the biggest pumpkin we had ever grown. The stem went clear through his eye socket and into his brain, killing him on the spot.

"This gal here's just lucky. That little pumpkin just bloodied her up a bit. What you need two eyes for anyway?"

Room for Two More

Ted and Wendy passed through mile after mile of the most epic winter wonderland. The sky above was a brilliant blue, and the snow was not too soft and not too hard. Even Goldilocks would have said it was just right. The two snowshoers were heading toward a place on the map called *Satan's Lava Flow*.

"This is amazing but, dude, I'm so hungry I would sell my soul for a brownie," Ted said after a few hours.

Just then they saw smoke in the distance. A fire, they both thought. It would be sweet to warm themselves by a fire while they ate lunch. After a few more minutes, they came to a cabin-like shelter.

"According to the map, this isn't supposed to be here," Ted said.

"Well, I'm going in," Wendy said. "You can stay out here and eat your map."

It was dark and smoky inside. Old, rustic benches surrounded a black wood stove. When their eyes adjusted to the darkness, Wendy and Ted saw that they were not alone.

A man sat huddled in the darkest corner of the shelter. A tattered, red wool blanket pulled tightly around his head made it hard to see his face except for his hollow, tired eyes, which looked out in the distance.

Ted said hello but the man didn't answer. The man's presence seriously weirded them out, so they quickly chomped down their lunch and said good-bye. Once again the man didn't answer.

Then just as they were about to leave, he suddenly turned toward them and those dead eyes came to life with an evil, dark glow that illuminated the shelter and threw dark shadows into their souls. He seemed to speak to them without words, and the things he said filled Ted and Wendy with a cold that had nothing to do with the temperature.

They quickly put on their snowshoes and headed back into the woods. Ted turned around once and thought he saw the entire hut glowing with that horrible, dark light. Wendy could have sworn she heard terrible laughter coming from its direction. They quickly crunched through the woods in silence. Ted finally spoke.

"Man, that guy was creepy."

"No duh," Wendy said. "Did you see how he looked at us?"

The short winter day was getting shorter and a storm was moving in. Fortunately the snowshoers saw a sign that told them they were just two miles from their car.

"Almost there," Ted said.

"Almost there," Wendy said.

A dark wind began ripping through the trees, knocking down huge icicles from the branches. The sky was now the color of snow and their legs began to ache.

After an hour they came to another sign. Ted studied the sign through weary eyes and then studied it some more.

"According to this we're still two miles from the parking lot," Ted sighed. "I don't understand it."

He was sure they had made all the right turns at all the right places. A sick feeling gripped his bowels at the next intersection. There, another sign told them they were no closer to the car.

"Okay, someone's playing a joke," Wendy said. "Maybe somebody switched all the signs."

Snow began to fall sideways as Ted pulled the map and compass out of his pack.

"Forget those dumb signs," he said in a shaky voice. "If we start heading north, we're bound to reach the parking lot or at least the highway."

Horror-struck, he saw the compass needle spinning madly. Round and round it went. Ted yelled and threw the compass against a nearby tree. Then, too tired to hold the anger, he dropped to his knees.

Which way was north? Everything looked the same. No landmarks. Just trees in every direction. Wendy wondered how things had turned so bad so fast. The wind was blowing harder now, the snow sticking to the trees like the fear that began to coat their insides. And it was getting cold. Very cold.

"We've got to s-s-start moving," Ted said through chattering teeth. They patted each other on the shoulders the way football players do before a game.

"We can do this," Ted said.

"We can do this!" Wendy shouted back.

An hour later the sky had disappeared behind the screaming snow and it was getting harder and harder to see. Still, with legs of lead they plowed on.

"I'm tired," Wendy whispered a few minutes later. "So tired. Wait... Do you smell that?"

It was the strong smell of blackened wood, like a fire after the fire has gone out. Somehow the shelter must be close by, Ted thought. They could get warm and rest and get out of the storm. Through the driving snow, they could barely make out the outline of the wooden structure. The last of their energy gone, they smiled weakly at each other and shuffled toward it. Then they stopped dead in their tracks.

The man was still there. Ted saw those evil eyes, looking past the snow and the darkness, looking into him. And Wendy heard the laughter again. *That terrible laughter*.

They went inside.

[Laugh your most crazy-sounding laugh while making crazy eyes at your audience.]

Meat Me in the Cafeteria

It all started with burgers.

After years of the most gruesome, gut-wrenching grub known to child and man, the cafeteria at Mission Viejo Elementary, suddenly and most unexpectedly, one day began serving the best burgers in the world. Fresh, juicy, fat, charbroiled, teachers running in the hall with scissors, crazy good burgers!

There was no chance of a food fight breaking out on the days these babies were handed out.

But then a strange thing started happening. The kids at Mission Viejo Elementary began to get old. No, not older like an eight-year-old waking up on their birthday morning and being nine. The kids at Mission Viejo Elementary were getting real old, real fast.

Little first graders with white hair. Wrinkled up third graders with bad knees. Fifth graders with dentures.

And then it became known that the company selling the burgers to the school was getting its meat from something other than cows.

To save money the company had been stealing bodies from nursing homes and cemeteries and turning them into… burgers. Fresh, juicy, fat, charbroiled, teachers running in the hall with scissors, crazy good burgers!

After that, salads became much more popular at Mission Viejo Elementary.

Wind in your sails, a parrot on your shoulder… It's pirate time!

Ol' Fish Brains

Ahoy, maties. Gather round and see if ye can stomach this tale of the sea. If ye have the spine for it, aye. For this here be the tale of Ol' Fish Brains, it be. Yo, ho, ho and a bottle of clam juice.

Arr…

'Tis no great mystery why the men of the *Stella* called him Ol' Fish Brains neither.

"Save me the heads, Cookie," he would whisper to the cook with a black look in his one good eye. "The heads."

He would pop out the eyes of the raw fish heads with his rotting teeth and chomp on 'em like they be gum and then suck out the brains through the empty eye sockets.

And there he'd be all a slurpin' and a smilin' with fish blood and brain juice running down his beard. Arr. Sometimes pieces, sometimes whole eyeballs would drop down into that beard and the eyes would look out at you and you'd swear that they could see right through you and every sin that ever stained yer soul. Aye.

'Twas all he would eat. Real picky that way, he was.

Arr, sure enough that Ol' Fish Brains 'twas a crazy, old seabird. There be no question of that, maties. He blew his nose on his shirt and sometimes forgot to wear his eyepatch to cover the ugly hole where his eye used to be before he rubbed it out of his head after an extra crusty biscuit crumb got in there.

But he talked of the map and the buried treasure so often that some among the crew started to believe. Not that they would admit to it, aye, but in their lonely bunks with only the lice for company, they dreamed of those gold coins, those gold coins that increased in number every time the ol' crow told the tale.

One night, four weeks out at sea, it was, these two unsavory buckos break into the last rum barrel on board and start a drinkin' and a talkin'. A talkin' and a drinkin'. Talkin' about the treasure.

Arr.

"I know where he keeps that map," the one says to the other. "'Twould be an easy thing."

So they set a plannin' the deed for the next night when Ol' Fish Brains be asleep in his bunk. But the ol' bird wakes up and pulls a knife. A terrible ruckus ensues and the next thing anyone knows, Ol' Fish Brains has the blade stickin' out of his one good eye and right before he dies, he sits up and yells, "Save me the heads!"

Arr. Well, nobody saw who did it. Or else nobody was willin' to say. Anyways, everyone from the captain to the cook felt more at ease now that Ol' Fish Brains was gone.

Aye. A quick prayer, over the side of the ship, and gone to Davy Jones' locker was he. Glug, glug, glug. Gone. Arr.

It was a still, black night three weeks later. No stars nor moon cut through the drippin' fog. Not a drop of wind in all the sea and a quiet, an eerie quiet, hung over the port. Aye. A creepy feelin' come in from the water all dark and dead like.

And 'twas then that they saw her out in the water. The *Stella*, it had to be. No life blowin' in her ragged sails, just hanging there all akimbo. But somehow she was movin' closer and closer to shore.

And when she came closer still, they could see the crew standing on deck. The first mate grippin' the wheel. The captain next to him. Aye. Not a sound they made moving through the water on that terrible night.

And then as she came even closer, some among the crowd let out a gasp. Others a scream. Some made no sound, just fainted. Others still ran back to the town, to the hills. It didn't seem to matter where. Aye.

For the men of the *Stella* were all missing their heads, ya see. Every last one of 'em. Not a head among the whole lot, aye.

Dead men tell no tales, so the few landlubbers who still had their wits about them were left with many a question but few answers. How did the *Stella* make its way back to port with a dead crew? How could the ship move with no wind in her sails? And what happened to the men and their heads?

Well, they never found the heads of the sailors of the *Stella*. Arr. Some say the ghost of Ol' Fish Brains took 'em. But that can't be. After all, there be no such thing as ghosts.

Arr! Hahahahahahahahahahaaaaaa! Arr!

Wack-O

The strange man with the deranged look in his eyes hid behind a tree. Running down the wooded river trail, Ed never knew what hit him. In a crazed split second, the man swung at Ed like Big Papi going for the fences. Wack-O! The huge branch exploded into the back of Ed's head and everything went black.

He was in a coma for three weeks and very nearly died. They never caught the man behind the tree.

After a long, painful recovery, Ed's life went back to normal. He even began running again.

One beautiful Sunday morning, Ed decided to go back to his favorite trail, the one where it had happened. At first Ed was troubled by the memory of that day and his heart raced ahead of his running shoes. But after a few minutes, the sights and sounds of spring filled his senses with the present. It was a new day. And it was great to be alive.

Ed ran hard and fast and felt the power returning to his body like an extinct volcano finding its magma again. Then he noticed the laces on his left shoe had come undone. He stopped behind a tree and... something happened. His eyes rolled back in his head, the color left his face, and the edges of his mouth turned up slightly into a threatening, sick smile.

Behind the tree, Ed waited patiently—with a heavy branch in his hand—for the next runner to pass.

Problem Number 13

Most of the babysitters in town wouldn't go near the house on Carney Hill. But Eliza was new in Big Top, so she hadn't heard the stories. All she knew was that Mr. and Mrs. Kerr needed a babysitter, and she needed the money.

The Kerrs and their three children seemed friendly enough. So what if the house was decorated with dozens of clown paintings? Eliza wasn't afraid of clowns. She couldn't understand why so many kids were.

"Joe and I will be back around 10 o'clock," said Mrs. Kerr. "Make sure the kids get to bed by nine."

The well-behaved children drew pictures quietly, mostly of clowns, and then watched an old black-and-white TV show called *Circus Boy* until it was bedtime.

After the kids were all in their beds, the babysitter reluctantly began doing her math homework under a giant painting which hung over the fireplace.

A few minutes later, Eliza glanced up from her work and noticed that the sad clown in the painting seemed to be looking at her. Nonsense, she thought. It was just that she was sitting right in the clown's line of sight. Still, she took her books and went over to the other side of the room.

When Eliza finished her homework, she looked up again at the painting. No. It couldn't be. The clown was looking right at her!

Eliza shut her eyes so tightly they felt like they were going to pop out of her head. Then suddenly she heard the children screaming and she ran upstairs toward the bedrooms. Out of the corner of her eye, she could have sworn she saw that the clown was no longer in the painting.

At the top of the stairs, Eliza froze. There, standing right in front of her, was the clown from the painting.

"How's the math going?" he laughed. "I've been watching you all night."

His large, red shoes began moving towards her and then he whispered, "I think you got problem number 12 wrong."

The last thing to come from Eliza's lips was a bloodcurdling scream. Then the lights went out at the house on Carney Hill.

The children were not able to explain what had happened and the police never found Eliza.

In all the confusion, no one noticed that Eliza had missed just one math problem — the last one, problem 12. And somehow no one noticed that the sad clown in the giant painting over the fireplace was no longer sad. Finally, no one noticed that there was something reflected in the clown's eyes: It was a girl. And she was screaming.

[Now scream.]

I Doooooooooooo...

Dan's knees shook like leaves on a windy day.

"Focus, Dan, focus," he told himself.

Dan had never gotten over his fear of heights. He had just learned to control it by paying attention to the small details of his job. For the last several years, Dan had been a window washer, hanging off the side of some of the tallest buildings in town.

"Wet it down," Dan reminded himself. "Now use the squeegee."

But Dan's knees weren't shaking on this day because he was hundreds of feet off the ground. He was shaking because he was excited. Linda worked on the top floor of this building. And tonight after work, he was going to ask Linda to marry him.

As Dan was working on the floor below Linda's office, he reached into his pocket to look at the ring he had bought her.

"I hope she says *yes*," he said out loud.

Suddenly the ring slipped out of Dan's sweaty hand. It bounced off the scaffold he was standing on and landed on the ledge of the building. He tried to reach it but his safety harness didn't let him. There was only one thing to do. Dan removed the harness and stretched for the ring.

Just as he grabbed it, a powerful gust of wind hit. The scaffold swayed violently. Dan lost his balance and fell over the side.

Dan found himself hanging from the bottom of the platform by the fingers of his left hand. His feet danced below him high above the busy street. Somehow, he was still squeezing his right fist around the ring.

With his heart screaming in his ears, Dan quickly put the ring in his pocket and grabbed hold with both hands. Using all his strength, he pulled himself back onto the scaffold and into his harness.

"That was close," Dan said, trying to catch his breath. "But it's all good now."

A few minutes later, Dan happily pounded on the window glass to get Linda's attention. She didn't hear him, so he pounded harder. Again she didn't hear. He started hitting the window so hard he thought the glass would break.

Finally, Linda looked up from her work and came toward the window where Dan was waving now. A look of horror filled her face. She turned pale and crashed to the floor.

"Linda!" Dan screamed. "Lindaaaaaaaaaa!"

Linda's best friend Barbara, who had heard the noise from next door, helped Linda up to a nearby chair.

"It was Dan, wasn't it?" Barbara asked.

"Yes," Linda said through her sobbing. "He came back just like he always does each year on this day. The day 13 years ago when he fell to his death."

Hot Heads of Jalapeño Canyon

"It get hot up there," the old man had warned them at the gas station. "I would not go there today if I was *chu*."

The four college buddies had rolled their eyes at each other and made the international sign for *loco de la cabeza*. When they got to the trailhead, the hikers loaded their packs and quickly put five miles behind them. The top of Mt. Gato Anaranjado was now just two miles away.

"Piece of cake," one of them said. "*Chu* would have to agree."

They all laughed. And their laughter echoed up and back down the canyon.

Back at the gas station, the old man was laughing too. He was laughing because he knew things. He knew, for example, that…

[Now start laughing and don't stop until your listeners start laughing too. Then stop laughing and pretend the story is over. When your friends ask questions or complain that the story wasn't scary, grab one of them and scream like you're insane.]

***

Sometimes the scariest thing about a story is the person who is telling it. Another way to tell this rather silly tale is to read it twice. Then just wait. When someone says something—and they always do—just start repeating whatever they say. Do this for a while, and when the person starts getting tired or annoyed, just SCREAM!

Don't Forget to Flush

Jesse Jones hated that *stooopid* little doll as much as he hated his *stooopid* little sister.

She was always getting him in trouble. (Although if truth be known, Jesse Jones did a fine job of that all by his lonesome.) She would pull that *stooopid* string nonstop and that *stooopid* little doll said those *stooopid* things nonstop.

"That outfit looks glorious on you."

"It's a beautiful day to play with your dollie."

"Shall we have some more tea?"

Stooopid, *stooopid*, *stooopid* things like that.

So one day when Jesse Jones just couldn't stand it any longer, he took matters into his own hands. His mom had taken Cathy to the mall and left him behind, even though he wanted to go check out the games at the used video game store.

"You're just going to have to learn to be nicer to your sister, Mr. Mean Brother Man," she had said before they walked out.

Jesse Jones hadn't planned on it. He was just walking around the house bored and mad. Then he saw it.

He was more than a little surprised that his sister had forgotten to take it with her. Jesse Jones started by throwing the doll on the floor and stomping on it. And kicking it. Then throwing it against the wall. Over and over again.

"What do you say to that?!" he yelled. "It's a beautiful day to knock the stuffing out of your dumb dollie. Ha, ha, ha!"

He was really having fun now and starting to feel better. Then it happened. Later Jesse Jones didn't really remember exactly how it happened. But the doll's head came off. At first he tried to put it back on, but that didn't work. After that he walked around the house, throwing the head in the air and catching it like a baseball. Eventually, he reached the bathroom.

Later Jesse Jones didn't really remember how the next thing happened either. But somehow or other the doll's head wound up in the toilet. As he was staring at the disembodied head just floating there, he heard the front door open.

"Jesse, we're home!"

Jesse Jones thought something like "oh, shoot" and acted quickly. There was only one thing to do.

Even before leaving the bathroom, he heard his sister's screams ripping the house apart.

"NooooOOOO!!!" she wailed. "My dollie!"

Jesse Jones was born for moments like these. He had to think fast. So he fed his mom some line about Buster being a likely suspect. And to his astonishment, his mom bought it.

"I can't believe Buster would do such a thing," his mom said, but there was something in the way she said it that made Jesse Jones feel like she could believe.

His only defense a sad, confused look, Buster did indeed end up taking the fall. He was sentenced to solitary confinement in the backyard.

"That, my friend, was a close one," Jesse Jones whispered to himself. "At least that *stooopid* dog is good for something."

When he saw his little sister later that day, her eyes were red and swollen. She was quiet. His teacher would have said she was heartbroken or something sappy like that.

"Serves her right," Jesse Jones thought. It had turned out to be quite an adventure but he had come out all right. More than all right.

Outside, the moon played hide-and-seek behind the oak tree and Buster whined sadly. When his mom said it was bedtime, Jesse Jones didn't argue. He was pooped. Plum tuckered out. He brushed his teeth and went to bed. Then he heard it. Moaning, soft and low.

"Why did you do that to me, Jesse? Why?"

The sound was coming from the toilet. It couldn't be coming from the toilet. But it came from the toilet. It came just the same.

“Why, Jesse? Jesse, Why? Whyyyyyy did you tear my head OFF?”

Being Jesse Jones, Jesse Jones got mad. Real mad. And then he got even. He went to the bathroom, flushed the toilet, and smiled. Then he went back to bed. He had no trouble falling asleep. But something woke him in the middle of the night. The voice of the doll was back. It was louder.

“Whyyyyyy, Jesse? WHY?!”

Jesse Jones began to worry that someone might hear, but he was beginning to get scared too. Too scared to go to the bathroom and look to see that there was nothing there. Nothing in the toilet. But what if there were? Better stay in bed, Jesse Jones counseled himself.

“Jesse, what you did to me wasn’t RIGHT!” The voice was closer now, and louder and angrier. “And what about poor Cath-EEEEEE?!”

Jesse Jones pulled the covers over his head and for the first time in his life felt real fear. The doll’s voice was closer still — it sounded like it was right above his head — and it didn’t sound like the doll’s voice anymore. It sounded wet and dark and not of this world.

“I-I-I’m sorry,” Jesse Jones stuttered and cried.

“It’s much too late for that,” the voice said. “Now you’re coming with MEEEEEEEEE!”

The next morning Jesse Jones didn’t come down for breakfast. His mother called and called and finally had to go into his room. When she opened the door, the smell almost made her vomit. It was as if the most terrible toilet in the world had backed up and overflowed into the room.

Jesse Jones was never seen again.

They're Coming For You 2
More Scary Stories that Scream to be Read

by

O. Penn-Coughin

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They're Coming For You 2

More Scary Stories that SCREAM to be Read

written and illustrated
by
O. Penn-Coughin

For Toad and Mag,
my two favorite children
in the whole world

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Introduction

There are two types of people: scary story people and the other kind. I'm glad you are the first kind. But if you're not, it's not too late. There's still time to join us—or to put down this book.

Scary story people are usually also roller coaster people. If you love one, you almost have to love the other. (I'm an exception to this rule. I love scary stories but am terrified even of Ferris wheels. *Especially* of Ferris wheels. Go figure.) Reading or listening to a scary story is very much like taking a roller coaster ride in the safety of your own mind. Sometimes both can make you shut your eyes, laugh, scream, or even throw up. By the way, throwing up in your own mind is not as bad as it sounds. Your stomach doesn't hold grudges and the clean up's a breeze.

These stories are meant to be enjoyed out loud or alone if—as they say—you dare. Either way, the whole point is to have fun. I had a lot fun writing this book. I hope you have fun reading it.

So strap in, hold on tight, and enjoy the ride!

O. Penn-Coughin

Death of a Ghost Hunter

Tonight on *Ghost Stalkers* we investigate the chilling case of Moore Elementary School, which is said to be haunted," Matt Matherson said looking into the lens. "The school has been closed for more than 50 years, but the stories—and the ghosts—refuse to die."

The green glow of the night vision camera cast an eerie light over everything and whited out Matt's eyes.

"It all happened here, back in the last century," Esther Wilmington said, walking down the hall. "Over the years, eight children died in Room 6 under mysterious circumstances. According to rumors—never proved—those kids literally died of boredom. These rumors—again, never proved—claim that the teacher put her students to sleep with her lessons. And that, sadly, some never woke up."

"Later, the authorities found that the true cause of the deaths was a gas leak," Jerry Harrison said. "According to survivors, old Mrs. Bonyhady's part in it was that she always had the heat turned way up and kept the windows tightly shut."

"As a precaution, we are all equipped with our own gas detectors and emergency oxygen tanks tonight," Matt said. "So I hope you can keep that bean burrito you had for dinner to yourself, Jerry."

They all laughed and walked into Room 6.

"There are some old timers who refuse to believe the science, though," Esther said. "They still maintain that it was Mrs. Bonyhady's boring lessons that killed those kids."

"Aaaaaaaaaah," the cameraman yawned suddenly, trying to sound like a dead child. "I'm soooooooo sleeeeeeepy."

It was what the director called a "fakeout." During the entire history of the show they had never come across any real ghosts, so the cast and crew would make things up from time to time to keep the viewers interested.

"What the blank was that?" Jerry said into the camera, his eyes growing large. "I have a blank feeling about this blank."

(The bleeps would be added later. Everyone agreed that the fake swearing made the show seem more real.)

"I don't know!" Esther shouted.

They became quiet and looked around, waiting.

Nothing happened.

"Gas readings appear normal," Jerry said.

The camera showed the empty desks and some overturned chairs. An ancient green chalkboard covered one entire wall. Broken glass littered the floor by the narrow, tall windows.

"What a terrible place to die," Esther said, shaking her head.

"Let's get out of here," Jerry said.

"You two keep exploring the first floor," Matt said as they stepped back out into the hall. "I'll take a look down in the basement."

In reality, Matt was headed up to the second floor, where he was supposed to put on a ghost costume and pop out of the girls' bathroom.

"Will do," Jerry said.

The camera followed Jerry and Esther as they walked down the long, dark corridor. Suddenly, a shadow crossed in front of them and disappeared into one of the rooms.

A rush of fear and excitement passed through Esther.

"Let's follow it," she said.

"Huh?" Jerry said. "Oh, right."

Inside the dark room, their headlamps illuminated the desks and chairs.

"Nothing out of the ordinary here," Jerry said.

Then they heard the sobbing. Esther pointed a shaky finger at the corner where a little girl sat with her back to them. She was holding her head in her hands.

"Help, help, help," she whispered. "Help him."

Horror-struck, the two ghost hunters said nothing.

“Class has started,” the girl said, fading as she turned toward them. “And he won’t be able to stay awake for long.”

She then disappeared down into the floor. Jerry and Esther ran out to the hall.

“None of that was in the script, man!” Jerry said nervously. “I’m getting out of here.”

“Not without Matt,” Esther said.

They hurried up the stairs to the girls’ bathroom. The cameraman followed.

Back in Room 6, Matt sat down at one of the desks. There was a dusty, old book in front of him.

“Hey, I don’t remember this being here before,” he said yawning.

“Class, we have a new student joining us today,” an old voice said. “Please turn to page 247.”

Even though the windows were broken, it was suddenly very warm in the room. The gas detector was still normal. Several ghost children now sat at the other desks, their heads down. Matt could hear some of them snoring, but he was strangely untroubled. His eyelids grew heavy.

“George Washington was the father of our country. He chopped down that cherry tree, children, and could not tell a lie…”

“Stay awake, Matt!” Esther shouted somewhere upstairs. “Whatever you do, do not fall asleep!”

“Shhh, keep it down,” Matt slurred as he slumped down in his little chair. “Some of us are trying to *zzztudeee*…”

“Find the verb in this sentence. Spell the word *misspell*,” the teacher continued. “Forty-eight divided by six equals…”

By the time they found him, it was too late. Matt was face down in a pool of his own drool.

“Good,” Mrs. Bonyhady said, blocking the door. “More new students.”

Missing Cat

"Five. Hundred. Dollars." Morgan kept repeating each word slowly. "Five. Hundred. Dollars."

He stood in front of the telephone pole staring at a flyer. The photo showed a longhaired white cat being held by an old woman with thick glasses. The generous reward was being offered for *Mister Framboise*.

"That's such a lame name for a cat," Morgan said to the poster. "Well, Mister Framboise, I'm gonna find you anyway."

Morgan saw a lot of cats that week, but not the one he was looking for.

He felt the $500 slipping away. Then he got an idea. He would paint one of those other cats to look like Mister Framboise.

"That stupid, old woman is probably half-blind," Morgan muttered. "She won't be able to tell the difference."

It didn't take Morgan long to find a longhaired black cat that looked to be the right size. Then he bought some hair dye at the drug store.

"Just hold still, Mister Framboise," Morgan shouted.

After some awful meowing, hissing, and scratching, Morgan had his white cat. It wasn't perfect—a few black spots still showed here and there—but it was good enough to get the job done.

Morgan called the number on the flyer.

"I think I found your cat," he said into the phone.

"Oh, that's wonderful," the old voice said. "Can you bring him over after the sun goes down?"

"Sure," Morgan said. "No problem."

After dinner, Morgan put the white cat in a cardboard box and walked over to the house. He rang the doorbell. The old woman from the picture opened the door.

"Here's your cat," Morgan said.

"Oh, my," the woman said, opening the box. "Mister Framboise, there you are. I was beginning to think I would never see you again. Please come in, young man."

The cat jumped out of the box and ran down the sidewalk.

It was dark in the living room, the only light coming from a few candles. Dust and cobwebs covered everything. The old woman brought Morgan some cookies and milk.

These are actually pretty good, Morgan thought, finishing the last one. *But this milk tastes nasty*.

"That's because I put a little something in it to help you relax," the old woman said without moving her lips. "And to help get the blood flowing."

"What? Hey, how did you know what I was thinking?" Morgan slurred, the room starting to spin. "Where's my money anyway? I brought, I brought, I brought back your cat."

"Oh, that's not my cat," the woman said.

"How could you tell?" he asked, his tongue growing too thick to speak. "You only *thaw, thaw, thaw* him for a *th-th-th*-second."

"I don't have a cat," she said.

Morgan tried to get up from the chair, but his legs didn't work. He tried to scream. But he was powerless.

The old woman came toward him. He could smell the death on her as she leaned in close. She then opened her mouth and her dentures dropped down into Morgan's lap. He saw the sharp fangs poke out from her pink-black gums. A second later they dug deep into his neck.

As the life drained out of him, the last thing Morgan saw was the old woman changing, becoming younger and more beautiful with every drop. *With every precious drop…*

El Chupacabras

Somewhere near the border between Arizona and Mexico, the three friends sat around the campfire. It had been a long day. In the distance a storm was gathering strength.

"My feet hurt," Duncan said.

"Tell me about it," Whitney said, throwing another branch on the fire.

"My shoulders are killing me," Jeremy said. "That backpack weighs a—"

There was a rustling in the nearby bushes.

"What was that?" Whitney said.

Suddenly a dog-like creature ran toward them. It stopped, gave a crazy-eyed stare, and howled. Then it jumped through the fire and back into the darkness.

"Man, that was nuts," Duncan said.

"I thought animals were supposed to be naturally afraid of fire," Jeremy said.

"Seemed like something spooked that coyote real bad," Whitney said. "Real bad."

A streak of lightning lit up the nearby saguaros. Thunder rumbled overhead. A cold wind began to blow. The storm was getting closer.

Just then an old man stumbled into camp. His hair was white and a tattered poncho covered his frail body. Thick wrinkles crisscrossed his leathery face. The old man's little eyes were filled with fear and he was out of breath. He sat down without waiting for an invitation.

"What are you doing out here?" Jeremy asked. "Are you lost?"

"El Chupacabras viene por mi, El Chupacabras viene por ti," the old man whispered, shivering.

"What's he talkin' about?" Whitney said.

"English, please," Duncan said.

Everyone was quiet for a while and then the old man spoke again.

"El Chupacabras viene por mi, El Chupacabras viene por ti."

"What's he sayin'?" Whitney asked in a high-pitched voice.

"You should have learnt you some Spanish," Jeremy said.

"You should have learnt *you* some Spanish," Whitney said.

The fire danced in the old man's beady eyes and rain began to fall. Thunder and lightning closed in all around. The wind spit sand into their faces.

"This is starting to creep me out," Duncan said, putting on his jacket.

The old man wrapped his poncho tighter around himself and just repeated, *"El Chupacabras viene por mi, El Chupacabras viene por ti."*

"I wish you would just shut up!" Whitney shouted. "You keep sayin' that and we done told you, we can't understand what it means."

The wind howled louder and the old man answered.

"El Chupacabras viene por mi, El Chupacabras viene por ti."

As lightning flashed overhead, the old man suddenly jumped up and threw off his poncho. He started shaking and circling the fire in a kind of insane dance. Slowly at first, and then faster and faster.

"Now what's he doing?" Whitney said, his eyes looking like the coyote's.

The old man kept dancing and shouting.

"¡El Chupacabras viene por mi! ¡El Chupacabras viene por ti!"

The last thing they saw was the old man lunge toward them with the speed of a wild animal.

The last thing they heard was the *thing*—no longer an old man—saying, *"El Chupacabras viene por mi, El Chupacabras viene por…**AAAH!**"*

***

*Before turning into a blood-thirsty beast, the old man kept repeating, "The goat sucker is coming for me, the goat sucker is coming for… **AAAH!***

Red Barn

There was something wrong with the red barn.

Mary had felt it the first day her family moved into the large house on 10 acres in the country. The barn was the first thing she saw as the moving truck pulled up, and she felt the wrongness of it deep down inside.

It was old and had been left out in the rain too long, mold covering as much of it as the fading, red paint. But it wasn't the exterior that troubled Mary. There was something in its bones that wasn't right, something that could not be explained away as just a bad case of the creeps.

Mary stayed as far away from it as possible.

And then came the winter.

Even in summer the house had been chilly for most of the day, but now it was downright cold around the clock. The old heating system couldn't keep up with the dropping temperature.

"We can't go on like this," Mary's mom said one night in December. "It's freezing in here."

When Mary got home from school the next day, she saw her father swinging an ax in front of a large pile of wood outside the red barn.

"I repaired that old wood stove today," he said as he brought the ax down. "Could use your help stacking this in the barn, Mare."

Mary felt her heart start playing hopscotch inside her chest at the thought of going into the old barn. But she reminded herself that her father was right there, a few feet away. What could happen?

She got some gloves from the house and began picking up pieces of splintered wood. She focused on the work and the sound of the ax outside, trying not to think about where she was.

"This isn't so bad," she told herself as she got into the rhythm of her task.

But every once in a while, it hit her. The dark evil of the place was there, all around her. Waiting. Waiting.

It was cold in the barn, cold enough that she could see her breath, but by the time she finished Mary was hot and sweaty.

She let out a long sigh.

"All done, Dad."

That night the house was nice and warm. Everyone was in a good mood.

Mary was filled with relief at having the wood stacking behind her. There'd be no reason now for her to have to go back inside the barn for a long time, and that made her happy.

But a few nights later, all that changed.

"My back's killing me, Mare," her dad said. "You think you could bring in some wood from the barn?"

Mary shuddered at the thought of going down to that sinister barn at this hour of the night. She slowly pulled on her boots and gloves.

It was cold and clear outside, but Mary didn't look up at the stars. She kept her head down, focusing on the small bit of ground illuminated by her flashlight. She could feel the barn out there, watching and waiting. Waiting for her.

It took all of Mary's courage to open the heavy, wooden door and step inside. It was even colder in the barn than it was outside. Mary's heart beat uncontrollably as she scanned the floor for the woodpile. When she found it, she put down the flashlight and quickly began picking up pieces.

Suddenly a loud creaking sound came from the wooden loft above her head. Something was up there. Mary wasn't going to stick around to find out what. Cradling a few pieces of wood to her chest, she ran out and up the dirt driveway back to the house.

Breathing hard, she put down the pile of wood near the stove.

"One more trip should do it," her dad said.

The words screamed inside Mary's mind.

ONE MORE TRIP!

"Can't this get us through the night?" she said, almost crying. "It's so creepy out there."

"Oh, Mary, there's nothing to worry about," her mom said. "The night's just playing tricks on you."

"Besides, it's good to face your fears," her dad said. "Get back out there, young lady, and face your fears."

A second later her parents were laughing at something on TV.

Mary went back out and then remembered she had forgotten the flashlight.

"That was stupid," she said, mad at herself and her parents.

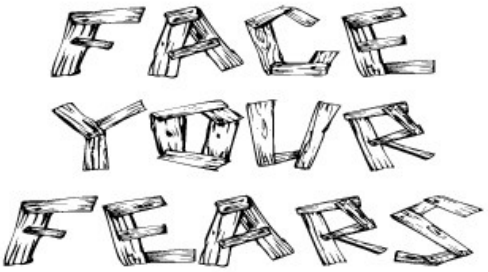
She could see the small light in the barn in the distance. She forced her legs to move quickly down the dark path.

"Face your fears," Mary mouthed as she walked. "Face your fears."

As she reached the barn, the light went out. Mary took a deep, shaky breath and went inside. She felt around on the ground for the flashlight. After several seconds that seemed like minutes, she found it and gave it a shake.

The light flickered back on. But Mary's sigh of relief died in her throat as she looked down at the ground in front of her. Her mouth hung open and her eyes widened with terror.

The once neatly stacked woodpile was now scattered all over the floor. It took Mary a few moments to realize that the pieces were arranged in crude letters. Letters that spelled out…



Then the flashlight went out again and the door slammed shut.

"Have you come to face me, Mary?" a voice whispered in Mary's ear. "Have you come to face your fears?"

It was the voice of the thing she had felt and dreaded all along. It was the voice of the evil that haunted the place. A pure evil that now reached out its fingers for her from the darkest depths of the barn.

Mary stumbled forward and somehow managed to open the door. She ran toward the house screaming.

Behind her the red barn shook with wicked, unspeakable laughter.

Mary ran screaming.

She couldn't stop screaming.

Fool's Gold

It was too cold for September, Joseph thought, staring at the flames as they shot up into the black sky. He rubbed his hands together for warmth.

"All for nut'in'," Elroy muttered, spitting on the ground.

Joseph and Elroy had been searching for gold in the Klondike wilderness for the entire summer and the only things they had to show for it were callused hands and sore backs. With autumn closing in, they knew that they had better find their fortune soon or they would be heading back home to Seattle empty-handed.

"Take it easy," Joseph said. "We're not done yet."

"Not at all like they said," Elroy said. "Only ones making any money here are those mule packers and merchants selling us the equipment."

Joseph studied his grimy hands in the fire's glow.

"Gotta just keep working," Joseph said.

Suddenly, there was a loud rustling noise in the bushes behind them. Elroy stood quickly, stumbling a little as he reached for his rifle.

"Who's there?" Joseph yelled out into the darkness.

Both men breathed hard, staring at the brush. They had heard about men being attacked and killed by huge grizzly bears out here. The rustling got louder and then something walked toward them. But it wasn't a bear. It was a boy.

The men breathed a sigh of relief. Then Elroy got mad.

"Shouldn't sneak up on people like that, fool," he shouted. "Nearly got kilt."

He set his rifle down against a rock.

The boy was about 10, with dirty clothes. Joseph figured he must be a miner's son.

"What ya doing out here?" Joseph asked.

"My pa died a while back. I been living out here ever since."

"Out here all by yourself?" Elroy said.

He nodded.

"You hungry?" Joseph said, offering a biscuit.

But the boy refused the food. He sat down by the fire.

"Well, you ain't staying with us," Elroy said. "Can't be taking care of no stupid boy. We got work to do."

But Joseph didn't see it that way.

"You stay here with us tonight, help us mine in the morning and we'll bring you into town when we're through. Somebody there will help you out."

"Thank you, sir," the boy said.

"Your pa find any gold out here?" Elroy asked, eyes half moons.

"Yessir, lots. Big nuggets too," the boy said. "Pa was always lucky like that."

"Lucky 'til he wasn't, you mean." Elroy let out a long chuckle, and downed the rest of his drink. He stood up and stretched.

"This is what we're gonna do," Elroy finally said. "Tomorrow you gonna show us where your pa's claim is at. And if what you say is true, maybe we'll keep you on for a while. You know, take care of you some."

Joseph knew that Elroy was up to no good.

"Best get to bed now, son," Elroy said, handing him their extra blanket. "See you in the morning."

Joseph and Elroy secured the camp for the night in case of rain. The boy fell into a quick sleep next to the fire.

"Yeehaw," Elroy said in a low voice. Gold was dancing in his eyes. "Tomorrow the two of us gonna be rich!"

"Take it easy," Joseph said. "Let's just wait and see. And I think you mean the three of us."

"I mean what I said, two of us," Elroy said. "Don't be a fool. We ain't gonna keep this boy on. He's gonna show us where this gold mine is and soon after that it will be back to the two of us. You follow?"

Joseph stared at the sleeping boy. Never had he seen such a paler face. He crawled inside the tent, both excited and troubled about the coming day.

In the morning, the fog lingered, leaving the day cold and eerie. They gathered up their gear and followed the boy.

"Elroy, let's just take him back tonight," Joseph whispered. He had been thinking about it all night. "We'll take him into town and then his gold will be ours."

"No can do," Elroy said. A big sack of equipment hung over his shoulder. "He'll spill his guts like he done with us and a hundred miners will be here tomorrow."

They walked on. Joseph wasn't sure what to do. Maybe he should try to talk some sense into Elroy. Or at least warn the boy.

"Pa liked to dig up in those rocks over there," the boy yelled back to them, pointing to an outcrop.

Elroy smiled and rubbed the thick stubble on his chin.

"I'm gonna do this quick, partner. No sense in dragging it out."

Joseph was torn. He didn't want to see any harm come to the boy, but he really wanted that gold and didn't want to share it with anybody.

"In here," said the boy, disappearing into the mouth of a small opening. Elroy threw down his heavy load, held tight to his rifle, and motioned Joseph to stay back.

"I'll call out when it's all clear," he said, winking.

Joseph stood on the thin trail alone in the wet morning, waiting. He tried to feel excited about the gold, but he felt awful and guilty.

Suddenly loud, horrible noises came from the cave. Screams and howls and grunts and groans. Awful spine-tingling, blood-splattering sounds. Some crazed beast was ripping apart Elroy and the boy.

"ELROY!" Joseph screamed, running up to the dark entrance.

He stopped, frozen in fear. The noises were louder and even more horrible. He fired a shot into the air, but it didn't stop anything.

"Must have been a bear in there," Joseph whispered. His mouth was dry as bone dust and his heart thumped fast and hard in his chest. After a few seconds, he backed away. "Can't save nobody now."

Joseph started running down the trail. He was filled with fear, but it didn't stop his feet any. When he couldn't hear those awful sounds anymore, he stopped for a moment to catch his breath.

What if that man-killing bear follows me? Best to wait. I can get a good shot here.

He climbed up on a rock that overlooked the path and waited. It wasn't too long before he heard something coming.

"Dang, that was fast," he whispered, gripping his rifle.

Sweat poured from his face. Then he saw it.

It wasn't a bear. It was that pale, 10-year-old boy standing on the trail. Blood was dripping from his face. His shirt was ripped and stained. His eyes were huge and wild. He didn't look like any sort of boy anymore.

The thing stood there in silence, its long, red-colored teeth glistening through the fog as he sniffed the air.

And at the very exact moment that Joseph realized that the thing was looking for him, their eyes met. The rifle smashed to the ground as the boy raced toward Joseph. Soon, more of that terrible screaming could be heard for miles and miles.

And then it was quiet again.

Your Right

An old woman walked by the cemetery one night and noticed a zombie rising up from its grave.

She hurried home and locked the door. She warmed up some old vegetable soup and slurped it down. After dinner, she went upstairs and got into bed. She put on her reading glasses and opened a book.

The wind pushed past the branches and the leaves and rattled the windows. And somewhere out in the night, a voice called out.

"Where's my small intestiiiiine?" it murmured in the distance.

The old woman put down her book.

"Who's got my tonsiiiiils?" it said, sounding a little closer.

The old woman pulled the covers tightly around her.

"Where's my appendiiiiix?" the voice groaned, just outside the front door.

The old woman shivered with fright.

"Where's my left kidneeeeey?" it said, now from inside the house.

The old woman held her breath.

"Have you seen my spleeeeen?" the voice moaned, coming up the stairs.

The old woman was about to have a heart attack when she suddenly remembered something.

"Hey, you're a zombie," she shouted as the zombie knocked down her bedroom door. "You don't need any of those things!"

"Your riiiiight—" the zombie said, shuffling toward the bed.

"I know I'm right," the old woman said as the zombie leaned over her.

"No, you didn't let me finish," the zombie said, taking a bite. "Your right…arm-*mmm*!"

Addy Lee

John Kilbane brought the autographed books with him to the school. The librarian had emailed the writer a long list of students who had bought his latest collection of ghost stories.

After the presentation, the librarian thanked John Kilbane and handed him a check.

"Thank you," Kilbane said.

"No, thank *you*," the librarian said. "I've never seen the students so excited about a book!"

Kilbane nodded and turned to leave.

"Oh, wait," she said. "Here's an extra one. I double-checked the list and no one by this name ordered a book. In fact, we don't have a student named Addy Lee."

She handed him the book and John Kilbane opened it to look at the name on the dedication page. There it was: *Addy Lee*. Maybe it got mixed up with another order, he thought. He put the book in his briefcase and walked out into the parking lot.

Back in the library, Ms. Deerfield told her ancient assistant about the author visit.

"The students just loved him," she said. "Strange about Addy Lee's book."

Old Mrs. Stern stopped what she was doing and whispered, "No…"

Pale as a corpse, she then collapsed to the floor.

"An ambulance is on its way," Ms. Deerfield told her a few minutes later when she had come to. "You gave me a real scare."

"I guess I scared myself too," Mrs. Stern said. "The last thing I remember was you saying—no, it couldn't be—saying something about Addy Lee."

"That's right. That's the name the author mistakenly signed in one of his books," Ms. Deerfield said. "I told him we didn't have anyone here by that name."

"That's where you're wrong," Mrs. Stern said, growing pale again. "We used to have a student here many years ago by that name. She was my best friend when I was a little girl. She died on the way home one day when the school bus slid on some ice and hit a tree."

At that exact moment, several miles away, John Kilbane's car was filled with a terrible, rotting smell and he heard the voice of a young girl coming from the back seat.

"I want my book," it said.

John Kilbane looked in the rearview mirror and couldn't believe what he saw. He turned around to have a better look. Sitting there was a small skeleton wearing a light blue, old-fashioned dress. Long hair still clung to the tiny skull.

"Who-who-who are you?" John Kilbane stammered. "What do you wa-wa-want?"

"My name is Addy Lee," the skeleton said and smiled. "And I told you, I want my book."

John Kilbane's heart stopped. A moment later, the car hit a tree. It was the same exact spot where Addy Lee had died 67 years earlier.

La Llorona

Stanley was swimming with Miguel, his best friend, down by the river. It was hot and the water felt right as the sun started to go down on this last day of September. Suddenly Miguel ran out of the water.

"Where you going, son?" Stanley asked.

"Gotta get home before *La Llorona* gets me," Miguel said.

"Is that the story about the crying woman who's always looking for her dead children?" Stanley said.

"It's no story, man," Miguel said, putting on his shoes. "She's real. My uncle said he saw her and the next day he died."

"All right, whatever," Stanley said, shaking his head. "See you at school tomorrow."

Miguel had once told him how the ghost of this tall, thin woman dressed in white would appear after dark. She would take kids who stayed out too late or who didn't listen to their parents. Sometimes she would appear to people before they died.

Stanley floated on his back staring up at the sky as the gentle current carried him. He wasn't thinking about *La Llorona*. He was thinking about his favorite thing: money. He loved holding it and counting it and he loved thinking of new ways of making it.

The next day, he came up with an idea. There were a lot of Hispanic kids like Miguel at school, and Halloween was coming up.

"One *hombre*'s scary story is another man's gold mine," he muttered to himself.

He wasn't sure what he was looking for but after visiting a few discount stores, he found it. It was a cheap plastic letter *Y*. He bought several dozen. When he got home, he tied a length of yarn to one of the letters. That was that. All he had to do now was give it a name and convince people they needed one.

"Yo Ro-Na Be Go-Na," he said. "That's it, Yo Ro-Na Be Go-Na!"

The next day before school, he paid some kids to start saying they had actually seen *La Llorona*.

"Say you saw her down by the river at night," he said. "She was dressed in white and crying and almost got you. Tell the story in class during your share time and at recess and lunch. Act scared, like it's real."

In the next few days, the stories started spreading through the school like a zombie plague. Pretty soon, everyone was talking about *La Llorona*. A lot of kids were actually scared. Stanley's plan was working to perfection.

The following Monday he set up a little stand with his necklaces.

"All you have to do is wear it and say *Yo Ro-Na Be Go-Na* three times and she can't get you," he said in his best salesman voice. "Only three dollars. And if it doesn't work, you get your money back."

He sold them before and after school and during recess and lunch. By the end of the week, he had made $339.

"This ain't cool, man," Miguel said to him a few days later. "My mom says you're playing with fire. You shouldn't mess with things you don't understand."

"All I understand is that I'm making a real killing," Stanley said, patting the big wad of cash in his pocket.

By Halloween it seemed that almost every kid in the school had bought the *Yo Ro-Na Be Go-Na* necklace and Stanley had made almost a thousand dollars.

When his mom took his younger brother and sister trick-or-treating that night, Stanley stayed home. He counted and recounted his money. Then he took a bath.

"And tomorrow's that—what's it called?—*La día de los muercos* or something," he said to his plastic duck. "Day of the Dead. I'm sure to sell some more."

Just then, Stanley thought he heard something outside the bathroom. It sounded like someone sobbing. And then it was quiet again.

An icy chill suddenly filled the room. Stanley shivered in the warm water. The lights went out.

"Mom," he called out. "Mom!"

But he remembered he was alone in the house. He heard the crying again. And then he saw her standing by the door.

Her white dress glowed in the dark. Her dark hair hung down over her sad, ghostly face. She floated closer to the tub.

"Yo Ro-Na Be Go-Na, Yo Ro-Na Be Go-Na, Yo Ro-Na Be Go-Na," Stanley repeated as he held up his *Y* necklace.

"Eso no sirve, mi hijooooooooo," she moaned. "It is tooooo late for that and it is tooooo late for yooooooooooooooou…"

La Llorona was now right over Stanley.

"You're not re-re-re-real," Stanley stuttered, tears streaming from his bulging eyes.

A bony hand pushed his head under the water. He tried to fight, but it was no use.

"No llores, mi niño," she whispered sadly. "Don't cry now. Sleep, my child. Sleeeeep…"

Dead Man's Cave

You got no shot with Chelsea," Rick said. "She's way out of your league, bro."

"We'll see," Adam said.

The two friends had been on the hot and dusty trail for three hours now. They were heading to Lake Podimouth up in the MacLamour Wilderness.

"Let's take a break," Rick said. "This pack is murder."

He propped up his heavy backpack against a tree and sat down on a large rock. Adam looked around as he drank some water. He spotted something nearby.

"Looks like a cave," he said. "Let's check it out."

"You go ahead," Rick said. "I'll rest here."

Adam dug out his flashlight and headed toward the opening.

"Be back in a few," he said.

Rick sat there eating a candy bar and looking at his map.

"Here it is," he mumbled. "*Dead Man's Cave*. How original."

A minute later he heard a loud crash coming from the cave followed by several echoes. Rick began to worry, but a few seconds later he saw Adam step out of the dark cavern.

"What was that noise, man?" he said.

"Huh?" Adam said. "Oh, I don't know."

Adam didn't say much after that. Rick thought that maybe he was mad because of the Chelsea thing, or because he didn't go with him inside the cave, or maybe he was just tired.

The hours and miles dragged on. But when they finally arrived at the lake in the late afternoon, it seemed a just reward for all their hard work. It was an epic spot, surrounded by snow-capped mountains, and they had it all to themselves. Even the mosquitoes left them alone. The only problem, as far as Rick could see, was that Adam was still quiet and strange.

After the first stars came out, they went inside the tent. Adam fell asleep the second he zipped up his sleeping bag. Rick followed a few minutes later. But something woke him during the night. It was Adam. He was weeping in his sleep.

"I want to live," he cried. "I want to live."

"Wake up, man," Rick said, shaking him. "Wake up."

Adam kept sobbing. Then he turned to face Rick.

Rick almost screamed out loud when he saw Adam's horrible expression. His red, bloodshot eyes seemed frozen with a kind of terrible confusion and fear. His face looked gray and lifeless.

"Don't leave me here," he moaned, grabbing Rick's arm.

"What are you talking about?" Rick said. "You just need to wa—"

Suddenly, Adam began to fade away right there in his sleeping bag!

"Don't leave me here," he kept sobbing as more and more of him disappeared. "I want to live."

The last to go were the eyes. Those terrible eyes, just floating there. And then he was gone.

In the morning Rick woke up feeling exhausted.

"Man, I had a crazy nightmare last night," he said, turning toward Adam.

But Adam wasn't there, and all his things were gone. Rick packed up, not sure what to think. He headed back to the parking lot.

As the miles passed under his boots, Rick still couldn't make any sense of it. Could Adam really be so angry that he would just pick up and leave without saying a word? And over what? It just didn't add up.

When he reached the spot where they had stopped the day before, Rick saw a backpack by the side of the trail. It looked like Adam's.

Then he heard a voice coming from inside the cave.

"Don't leave me here," it whispered. "I want to live."

His heart racing, Rick ripped through his pack looking for his flashlight.

"C'mon," he said. "C'mon."

He finally found it and ran to the cave.

Adam was inside, about 20 feet from the entrance. He was down on the ground. His red, bloodshot eyes were open and staring out at the blackness. He had the same terrible expression as the night before.

It looked like he had been killed instantly by a falling stalactite.

Rick reached down to close his friend's eyes. Adam's face was ice cold. It felt like he had been dead for several hours—*maybe even as long as a day.*

I So Saw that Coming

Justin's friends decided to play a trick on him for his birthday. Jarrod distracted him after school while the three others raced over to his house and snuck into Justin's room through an open window.

"What do you want for your birthday? How old will you be next year? What's your favorite color?" Jarrod asked.

Justin became suspicious.

Why is he asking me all these dumb questions? He wondered. *Something must be up.*

"I've got to go," he said, starting for home.

When Justin got to his house, he went to his room to drop off his backpack and change. Jerry was hiding under the bed. Jason was in the closet behind some hanging shirts. Jermaine was behind a chair. They were all wearing clown masks.

The three friends had agreed to count to ten in their heads the moment Justin entered the room. Then they would pop out.

"Surprise!" Jerry shouted, grabbing Justin's leg when he neared the bed. Justin stumbled and fell.

"Surprise!" Jason screamed a second later, leaping from the closet.

"Surprise!" Jermaine bellowed as he jumped out from behind the chair.

They all started laughing. All of them except Justin.

Pale as a white crayon, Justin crawled over to the corner. He just huddled there, rocking back and forth, nodding his head.

"I *so* saw that coming," he mumbled. "I *so* saw that coming. I *so* saw that coming. I *so* saw that coming. I *so* saw that coming…"

Since that day 10 years ago, Justin has not said anything else.

He sits on the floor in the corner of his padded room at the asylum and repeats those words over and over and over again.

"I so saw that coming. I *so* saw that coming. I *so* saw that coming. I *so* saw that coming. I *so* saw that—**AAAH!**"

All the Pretty Vampires

Vampires had taken over the world.

All the best-selling books were about vampires. All the top-rated TV shows were about vampires. All the biggest money-making movies were about vampires. All the beaches were deserted. Tans were out. Pale was in. All the kids wanted to look and dress like vampires.

Vampires were cool and *oh so pretty*. Everyone either thought of himself as a vampire or in love with one. It got to the point where vampires hardly even needed to bite anyone. They just fed off all the love. The whole world was under one big vampire spell.

The whole world except for Dr. Gordon "Gordo" Chubbs, that is.

Gordo was old school all the way. He grew up back in the day when you killed vampires because they were undead and evil. Vampires were ugly. Vampires were bad. They had to be staked. End of story.

Gordo worked day and night in his lab to come up with an antidote to this curse of the pretty vampires. After years and years of failure, he finally came up with the solution.

It was all about the mirrors. As everyone knew, vampires could not see their own reflection. But what if they could? That would change everything, Gordo concluded.

He came up with a serum that allowed vampires to see themselves. But he still had a problem. How would he get the bloodsuckers to take it? Most of them were too smart to knowingly bring about their own doom.

And then one day, it came to Gordo. He would put the serum in the water supply. Of course, vampires didn't drink water. But humans did. And vampires still occasionally feasted on humans. The cure would be transmitted through humans.

Vampires began to see what everyone else could: they were pretty. *Oh so pretty.* Some vampires had not seen themselves in centuries. It was all too much, too fast.

Vampires began standing in front of the mirror for hours and hours, hypnotized by their own undying prettiness. And it wasn't long before their heads started growing, expanding, stretching until—Kapow! Kaboom! Kasplash!—they exploded.

Dr. Gordon "Gordo" Chubbs had done it! He had found a way to stop the curse of the pretty vampires.

Of course, the head exploding thing didn't exactly kill the vampires. They just stumbled around without heads. But they were totally helpless and harmless. And they were ugly. A headless vampire loses its charm fast. Most of them walked around like this until the sun came up. And then, of course, they burned up. The few smart ones—and they had to be smart to have no head and still remember to stay out of the sun—the few smart ones who returned to their coffins by day died of malnutrition.

Meanwhile, the humans suddenly woke up from their long sleep.

"I can't believe I used to love these ugly, headless freaks," people would say.

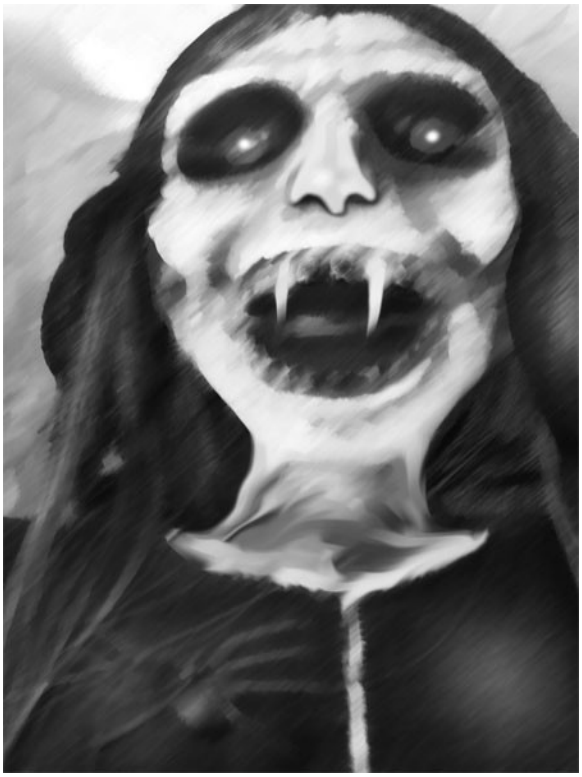
And then townspeople everywhere—doing what townspeople everywhere did best—got out their stakes and mallets and combed the countryside.

"Kill the freaks!" they shouted. "Kill 'em all!"

Suddenly finding themselves without heads, love, or sunscreen, the vampires began to disappear in record numbers.

Statues of Dr. Gordon "Gordo" Chubbs started going up all over the world. And in the ruins of a dark castle in Germany, seeing his chance, a long-forgotten, pieced-together monster started spending a lot of time in front of his mirror trying to figure out ways to become pretty.

"Fire, *bad,"* he would say, combing his hair. *"*Pretty*, good. Ummm,* pretty*, goooooood."*



Math Whiz

Sarah went outside to get the mail. She pulled out a blue envelope from the mailbox. It was written to her and had no return address. She hardly ever got any mail. Just a card from her grandmother once a year. But her birthday was in February, not July.

A warm wind blew through her hair. She opened the letter.

"Dear Sarah, See you in 5 days," was all that was written.

The next day after basketball practice, she found another blue envelope on her bed.

She opened it up.

"Dear Sarah, See you in 4 days."

A chill went down her spine. Goose bumps covered her arms. Who was sending these? It must be one of her friends having some fun, she thought.

The next day at the mall, her friends denied sending her the letters.

"I mean, really, I would just text you," Annabelle said.

"Not me," Quentin said. "I don't even know where to buy stamps."

As she walked home, she saw the postal carrier next to her mailbox.

"Good timing, girlie," the woman said. "This one's for you."

Her heart raced as if the game was on the line and she was shooting a three-pointer. She took the blue envelope and went inside the house. She opened it slowly.

"Dear Sarah, See you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? What a jerk!" Sarah shouted. "Can't even count!"

Her friends laughed the next day as they passed the letters around.

"Probably somebody who failed math," someone said.

"Yeah, it's your future husband, Sarah," someone else said.

They kept on laughing, but Sarah felt queasy and worried that the enchilada she had just eaten for lunch would rise up and explode from her.

She walked home in the summer heat, sweat pooling on her upper lip. A few times she thought she heard footsteps behind her, but when she turned around no one was there.

When she got home, she found Scott Smith sitting on the front steps. She hadn't seen him since school had let out almost a month before.

"Hey, Sarah," he said, smiling.

"Hey, Scott," she said, wondering what he was doing on her porch.

She got her key out.

"Wait a minute," she said, putting things together. "Is it you? Are you the one sending those awful letters?"

She was mad now, could feel the rage burning in her blood.

"Yup," he said, grinning. "And here I am. Want to shoot some hoops?"

"For the love…" Sarah muttered as she pushed past him toward the front door.

"By the way, you scared me half to death," she said, turning around.

But Scott was gone.

"Guess I hurt his feelings," she said to no one. "Serves him right."

Relieved at least that the mystery was solved, she poured herself a large glass of lemonade and went to watch television.

That night Sarah was on the phone with Darcy.

"Hey, wasn't Scott Smith in your math class last year?" Sarah asked.

"Yeah, he was," Darcy said. "Why?"

"Was he bad at math?"

"Yeah, poor guy was no genius," Darcy said. "But I suppose it doesn't matter now."

Sarah explained that Scott was the one who had been leaving her notes and that he had visited her that afternoon.

"I don't think that's very funny," Darcy said. "You shouldn't say stuff like that."

“Why?” Sarah said. “What are you talking about?”
“You must have heard,” Darcy said. “Scott Smith died in a skateboarding accident *last week*.”
Sarah’s blood went ice cold before she fainted and fell to the ground.

The Diary of Flem Smith

6 September, 1620… Our ship, the *Mayflower*, has set sail for America. It will be a long voyage. I do not understand why we had to leave Holland. I was born in England, but Holland is the only home I can remember. I miss Femke, my best friend. Father says the Dutch are not like us. I do not understand why that is a bad thing.

17 September… I have not vomited for two days.

22 September… A strange man from Holland is on the ship. His name is Jan Boemann. He only speaks a few words of English. He is very thin and tall. He dresses in black from head to toe except for the large white ruff around his neck. This collar is so ghastly and white, it hurts the eyes. Stranger still is that no one has seen Jan Boemann in more than a week.

30 September… People say now that Jan Boemann must have fallen overboard.

4 October… It is always night and loud down here. The wind and the waves and the coughing and the vomiting and the other body noises fill the foul air. The darkness hides the bugs in the biscuits. Nothing hides the smells. Such wretched smells.

9 October… A most heinous sailor has died. He would say awful things. Father says he was no better than the lice and fleas that crawl over our heads and bodies. Still, I am filled with sorrow at his passing.

11 October… The storms have been bad. Our tiny ship is tossed about on this great ocean. We are taking on water and there is talk we may have to turn back. I fear we may sink to the bottom of the sea.

14 October… The *Mayflower* has been repaired. The captain is confident we will reach America.

16 October… It was my turn again to go on deck and empty the bucket. It takes all of my concentration to keep the vile thing upright as the ship rocks from side to side.

19 October… One of the men fell into the sea during a storm, perhaps like Jan Boemann, but he managed to hold on to ropes and was pulled up to safety.

6 November… A servant boy died today. He is the second. Somehow, I do not think he will be the last.

9 November… Land! Land ahoy! We have reached America.

27 November… The men have been searching the coast for a place to build our new home. They have seen savages in this wild land. I wonder what new and strange animals we will encounter as well.

4 December… It is hard to see land so close and to have to stay aboard this miserable ship. Oh, to walk in those woods would be such a thing. I am not afraid of the cold or the savages. If only I knew how to swim. If only the waters were not freezing. I would do it. I would.

22 December… The men have finally found the spot. They will build the town by day and return to the ship at night. The icy sky screams with wind and snow.

29 December… John Poundstone returned today with a strange story. In the distant trees he saw a thin, tall man dressed all in black. It was Boemann, he said. It could not be. But it was. As John approached, he saw that the large ruff around his neck was now dark red in color. His eyes were also red and his teeth and fingers had grown long and pointy. Father says it is the fever talking.

1 January, 1621… John Poundstone died today. His last words: "The Boemann is coming for me."

3 January… The snow falls silently on the dark water. December took with it six souls. The new year already two. They bury the bodies on the hill.

15 January… We are finally on dry land and off that terrible ship. We all live together in a common house. It is no bigger than the *Mayflower*, but we are on dry land. Finally, dry land. I thought I would be happier and, yet, I am troubled. I sense a darkness I cannot explain. A darkness blacker than night.

19 January… The story of Boemann will not die. It is said now he is here with us. Some of the older children have taken to singing a song: "If the scurvy or the cold do not take you, The Boemann will."

23 January… Little Jonas Gutkind's screams filled the night. "No, don't let The Boemann take me!" It was plain to see there was no one there. But Jonas saw him just the same. His little eyes still bulged with terror after he was cold and dead.

February 28… No one is singing anymore. Fully one quarter are dead. Many more will surely follow. It is cold here. So cold.

7 March… Terrible storms with no end. The world is white and The Boemann is real. I swear it. I saw his eyes last night in the dark. I was too weak from coughing to scream. I shake from fever and see him in my sleep still.

15 March… I saw The Boemann again last night. His long fingers stretched out for me. He smiled at me with his long, sharp teeth. And then he whispered in my ear, "Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. Do not be a… AAAAAAH!!!"

***

Almost half of the 102 passengers on the Mayflower died during that first winter in America. They died of cold, hunger, and disease. It is not known how many were taken by The Boemann.

Not Joaquin

There was a creepy old hotel in a very scary part of San Francisco.

"We only have one room left," the hotel clerk said one night. "But it's said to be haunted by the head of Joaquin Murrieta."

"I'll take it," the man said.

As the man was falling asleep, he heard a terrible moaning coming up through the floor. And then a bloody head suddenly started floating in the middle of the room.

"No soy Joaquin," it wailed angrily. "I'm not Joaquuuuuuin."

The man ran out screaming.

The next night another guest was staying in the room. Just as the man was about to fall asleep, he heard the moaning coming through the floor. And then the bloody head appeared.

"No soy Joaquin," it cried as it floated in midair. "I'm not Joaquuuuuuin."

The man screamed and jumped out the window.

The following night a famous ghost hunter checked into the hotel.

"I want the haunted room," she told the clerk.

"It's all yours," he said.

The ghost hunter got in bed and started reading a book about the famous Joaquin Murrieta.

According to the book, Joaquin Murrieta was either a hero or an outlaw or both. To some people, he was a sort of Mexican Robin Hood. But to the governor of California at the time, Joaquin Murrieta was a murderous bandit. The governor offered a $5,000 reward for his capture—dead or alive.

In 1853 a man thought to be Murrieta was shot and killed. To prove that they had their man, the posse cut off the dead man's head and put it in a jar filled with alcohol. Some people said it was Murrieta, but others disagreed.

The head became the most famous head in California. It was taken from town to town and people would stand in line and pay to see it. Later it was displayed in a San Francisco museum until it was lost in the earthquake of 1906.

"And this hotel was built on the very site where the head was last seen," the ghost hunter said. "Fascinating."

Suddenly, the moaning began. And then the head rose up through the floor.

"No soy Joaquin," it said as it floated in midair. "I'm not Joaquuuuuuin."

The ghost hunter slowly closed her book.

"No soy Joaquin," the head wailed again. "I'm not Joaquuuuuuin."

"Honey, I don't blame you," the ghost hunter said, reaching for the phone. "Let me call you a taxi. I wouldn't be caught dead *walking* these streets at this time of night either."

***

For the ending to work, the reader needs to make sure that the name Joaquin is pronounced "wah-keen" throughout the story.

The Old Theater

The phone rang.

"I'm on my way," Dr. Childs said, her eyes looking away from her sons.

Courtland and Chip had been waiting all summer for *Man of Lead II*. From the trailer, it looked like it was going to be even more *sick* than the original. Today was the premiere and they were all ready to go.

"I'm so sorry, fellas, but Mrs. Matthews has gone into labor," Dr. Childs said. "I'll make it up to you."

The two boys didn't say anything.

A few minutes later they were riding their bikes in the hot afternoon sun and talking about how much it sucked to have a doctor for a mom.

"Stupid Mrs. Matthews and her stupid baby," Courtland said. "I hope it comes out super ugly with its butt where its face should be."

"Hey, you know it would be cool if these bikes were really motorcycles," Chip said. "That way we could go see the movie by ourselves."

"Yeah, but they're not," Courtland said. "So wake up and smell the *caca*."

The boys rounded a corner. And that's when they saw the sign.

"Now Playing… *Man of Lead II*."

"Would you look at that?" Courtland yelled, bringing his bike to a screeching stop. "I didn't even know this place was open again."

They were in front of the *Theater California*, the old downtown movie house, which had been closed for as long as Courtland and Chip could remember. But here it was open and playing *Man of Lead II*.

"It's meant to be, son!" Courtland said.

They got off their bikes and walked up to the ticket booth. The next showing was in five minutes. Courtland bought two tickets.

When they reached the entrance, Chip suddenly stopped.

"You know what kids at school say about this place," he said.

"They're idiots, Chip," Courtland said. "And I don't care if this place *is* haunted. Today it's haunted in a good way."

A girl stood by the door dressed in clothes that made her look like she lived at a costume shop.

"Hey, how long has this place been open?" Courtland asked excitedly.

She didn't seem to hear him. She just took their tickets.

The theater was extra dark and empty.

"This place is kinda scary," Chip said, looking around.

"Change your diaper," Courtland said.

But even though he wouldn't let Chip know it, the theater gave him the creeps too. He started thinking about the stories surrounding the place. How it had been shut down because of unexplained disappearances.

They sat down in the middle of a row near the front. A minute later the curtain went up.

The movie was awesome, with even more *killer* action scenes than the first.

"That was soooo coooooool!" Courtland said as the credits started rolling.

But when he looked over, Chip wasn't there. In all the excitement, Courtland hadn't noticed that his brother had left.

Must have gone to the bathroom, he thought.

"What's taking so long?" Courtland said after several minutes. "Maybe the fool's waiting for me out front."

He stood up and shuffled sideways down the row of seats. A sharp bolt of pain suddenly shot up his spine.

"Guess that was a long movie," he mumbled, reaching for his back.

The pain only got worse as he slowly made his way up the aisle. When he turned down the hall, he saw the costume girl again. She had her back toward him.

"Excuse me, miss?" Courtland called out. "Have you seen my little brother?"

Again, she didn't seem to hear him. He walked up and tapped her on the shoulder. When she turned around, Courtland's jaw dropped. He almost fainted.

The girl's flesh was now a putrid shade of gray. Purple and green drool ran down her chin. She was an old woman—a *dead* old woman!

Courtland hobbled past her as fast as he could. Just as he was about to open the glass door that led outside, he heard someone call his name.

"Courtlaaaand," an old voice said. "What's happening, Courtlaaaand?"

Courtland turned around. An old man was coming toward him. He was ancient and bald with large freckle splotches covering his head. And he was wearing Chip's clothes.

"What did you do to Chip?" Courtland shrieked, the terror exploding in his voice.

The old man looked confused, and then scared. And as Courtland looked into his glassy eyes, he saw a familiar expression.

The old man *was* Chip.

Courtland screamed and then the old thing that was Chip began screaming too. Courtland turned toward the door.

If he could only get outside. If he could only get past the door. Then everything would be all right, he told himself. Everything would be fine.

And then Courtland caught a glimpse of his own reflection in the glass door. An old man was looking back at him.

Dr. Childs returned home that night to find her sons gone. The police searched all over town for them, but they didn't think to look in the old movie theater. After all, it had been closed for more than 30 years. It was closed still.

The two boys were never seen again.

Hit the Road, Jack

"Make sure to cut away from you," Ana's dad said. "So you don't hurt yourself."

"Okay," Ana said.

Ana held the fine-toothed saw tightly as she plunged it into the soft orange flesh.

Carving pumpkins was one of Ana's favorite things to do. She could hardly wait for October. Every year the pumpkin she carved was more frightening than the year before.

She removed the lid.

"And now, *vee vill* operate on the patient's brain…" she said, laughing at her mad scientist joke.

A few hours later, Ana and her dad stood in front of the house in the dark, staring at her creation.

"Wow, Ana, for sure that's your best one yet," her dad said. "It looks horrifically frightening!"

It had been a long soccer practice for Jeff Keating. He was frustrated at having been shut down during the scrimmage by the defense and by his own teammates' lack of skill.

"Nice one, turd," he had shouted at his own goalkeeper as he watched yet another ball get by him and roll to the back of the net.

It was getting dark as Jeff climbed the street that led up to his house. A large, pale moon was rising over the neighborhood and dead leaves blew across the sidewalk.

Still upset, Jeff felt a terrible need to kick something. And to kick it hard. That's when he saw it there on the porch of a house. Looking extra stupid and just asking for it.

Jeff walked up quietly, grabbed the jack-o'-lantern, and headed back to the street.

"He shoots! He scores!" he shouted a second later, kicking the pumpkin with all his strength. He watched it break into a dozen pieces as it hit the asphalt.

Jeff felt much better the rest of the way home.

The next day was a good day. Jeff aced his math test at school, had lunch with Rebecca Westbrook, and scored three goals during soccer practice.

The sun disappeared from the sky as Jeff walked back home. Strolling along the quiet streets, he felt happy and full of energy.

Then something caught his eye.

He noticed a pumpkin on a porch. There was nothing strange in that—it was October after all. But there was something eerily familiar about this pumpkin. He had seen that face before. A candle burned in it, sending shadows ricocheting off the walls of the house. As he stood staring, Jeff felt certain it looked identical to the one he had splattered all over the street the night before.

"That's weird," Jeff said, walking quickly by the house. A gust of wind blew down the street, kicking up leaves and dust.

"Maybe some kids worked together, did two of them," he said, walking on.

Half way down the next block, Jeff stopped abruptly.

"It can't be," he said out loud, startling himself with the shakiness of his voice.

In front of a red house the same jack-o'-lantern sat glowing and smiling at him.

"This is ridiculous," Jeff said. "Someone must have seen me kick that pumpkin yesterday and wants revenge. This kid must be some loser to care this much about a stupid gourd."

As Jeff talked to himself, he turned up the street where he lived. He was almost home. He thought of all the things he would do. He would eat a big plateful of spaghetti sprinkled with at least half a pound of Parmesan cheese. He would watch his favorite reality show on TV. He would call Rebecca.

He was jogging now, his soccer bag slamming into his butt with every step. He dug into his jacket pocket for his key.

And then he stopped dead.

There on the doormat by the front door was the pumpkin. The same pumpkin. There was a darkness that poured from deep in its core out through its features. And then the eyes came to life with an evil glow. It looked right at Jeff and laughed.

The jack-o'-lantern began rolling slowly toward him. Then as Jeff screamed, the pumpkin burst into flames and picked up speed. Jeff dropped his bag and took off running down the street.

At first he put some distance between himself and the pumpkin, but the burning, orange ball began to get closer and closer. Jeff could hear its cackling, demented laughter get louder with each step.

Toward the end, the pumpkin was so close that Jeff could smell its burning flesh mixing with his own scorching skin.

Jeff begged for mercy, but the jack-o'-lantern just kept laughing.

Pagliaccio

Mario was walking home late one night. He was exhausted. He had worked his day shift followed by his friend's night shift at the mannequin factory. Sixteen straight hours.

"That's the last time I do that," he mumbled. "The last time."

The streets were deserted. It was a clear, cold, and windy night. Mario pulled the hood of his sweatshirt tight around his head. The wind was blowing trash down the alleys and cutting into his face.

He heard a strange, far-off sound. At first Mario thought it was the wind. It had to be. But as he got closer, he realized that it was singing. It was the saddest sound Mario had ever heard. Horrible laughter and heartbreaking sobs mixed in with the Italian words.

"Laugh, clown, at your broken love!

Laugh at the sadness that poisons your heart!"

Mario's route home took him closer and closer to the terrible sound. It had to be coming from a radio or stereo, he thought. But as he turned a corner, Mario saw that he was wrong. There was a man dressed as a clown, sitting on the curb, with his face in his hands. He was singing and laughing and crying all at once. It seemed impossible, but that's what was happening.

A mixture of fear and pity gripped Mario as he slowly walked up to the man.

"What's the matter?" Mario asked, bending over the clown. "Can I do anything to help?"

The clown kept crying into his hands. Mario grabbed the man's shoulder and the clown turned toward him. He dropped his hands from his face and stopped singing.

Mario then saw that the clown had no makeup and no eyes and no nose, just a horrible mouth with thin lips that stretched from ear to ear!

Mario gasped and struggled for air as he stumbled away down the sidewalk. He ran faster than he had ever run in his life. At first he could hear the clown singing again somewhere far behind him.

"Laugh, clown, at your broken love!

Laugh at the sadness that poisons your heart!"

Then all Mario could hear was the beating of his own heart.

After running several blocks, he finally began to slow down. Walking again, he started to catch his breath. He almost began to think that he had imagined the whole thing. But that face, now forever burned into his memory, told him it had been real. It was *too* horrible to imagine.

He started to walk faster. He wasn't far from home, but on this night each block felt like a mile.

And then he saw it. A taxi was parked up ahead. It had its lights on.

"Why not?" Mario said to himself. "I deserve a break."

He slid into the back of the cab and told the driver his address. Mario looked out the window at the buildings going by. He felt better and began to get sleepy. But after a while, he realized something was wrong.

"Hey, you're going the wrong way," Mario said to the driver. "My house is in the opposite direction."

The driver didn't answer. He turned off the meter and kept driving the wrong way.

"Hey!" Mario shouted. "Turn this car a—"

A song came on the radio. The music sounded hauntingly familiar. Then Mario heard the singer's words.

"Laugh, clown, at your broken love!

Laugh at the sadness that poisons your heart!"

Mario put his hands over his ears and began screaming. The last thing he saw was the driver turn toward him.

Somehow, Mario hadn't noticed that he was dressed as a clown. But he now saw—saw too late—that the man's face had no makeup and no eyes and no nose, just thin lips that stretched from ear to ear!

Paaa-Teee

"This guy's bought it," Bruce Babbington said, pulling a tarp over the body. "He's got no head."

"Yeah, this one too," Ron Cornelius said. "He's still got a head but it's facing the wrong way."

"It's strange how the van's in pretty good shape," Babbington said. "Like they weren't going that fast. No way there should be such terrible injuries."

Babbington and Cornelius had seen their share of horrific accidents. The two paramedics had been partners for 11 years.

They began attending to the three other victims.

"These two in here look dead, blood and brains all over the place," Cornelius said from the back of the van. "But somehow their vitals are good."

"This one's got a strong pulse too," Babbington said, leaning over the driver. "Breathing's good."

Cornelius suddenly dropped his first aid bag.

"B-b-b-Bruce," he stuttered, pointing at the tarp.

Babbington looked over.

The headless body was moving. It was sitting up. It was alive!

"That can't be," Babbington whispered, his eyes the size of Ping-Pong balls.

Just then Cornelius felt something grab his shoulder. He turned around—and turned as white as sugar on snow. It was the other corpse, the one with the head twisted around facing the back of its body. It was standing there, trying to speak.

"Uuugh," it moaned. *"Paaa-teee."*

The headless body was now moving toward Babbington.

"It's the end of the world!" Cornelius shouted. "Save yourself, Bruce."

"Paaa-teee," the corpse repeated, its arms flailing. "Paaa-teee."

"The living dead have taken over," Babbington screamed, running down the road. "Aaaaaah!"

Cornelius tried to follow, but the dead thing had a death grip on him.

"Paaa-teee," it said again. "Don't be afraid. You see, at the time of the accident we were headed to a *paaa-teee*, a costume *paaa-teee*… dressed as zombies."

El Viejo de la Bolsa

Manuel flew through the air on the park swing, higher and higher, until there was only sky. Suddenly he lost his grip and fell, landing hard on his head.

It hurt for a moment, but then Manuel felt all right. He got up off the ground and looked at the color of the sky. It was getting late. He knew he had to hurry if he wanted to get home before it got dark.

"*El Viejo de la Bolsa* will get you," his grandfather used to tell him when Manuel was younger. "He takes *shildren* who don't come home for the dinner."

Then the old man would dig his strong fingers into Manuel's ribs and laugh. Manuel didn't laugh then and he wasn't laughing now. He didn't believe a lot of the same things he did when he was little. But this story of the *Sack Man* still had power over him. It wasn't something he would admit to his friends and by the light of day it seemed like just another one of those things adults told kids to get them to behave.

Either way, the light of day was dying and his friends were probably all safe at home.

Manuel took a deep breath and walked quickly, not looking at the growing shadows of the graveyard. This dirt path circling the cemetery was the shortcut he took whenever he stayed at the park too long. His *abuelito* was buried here.

Maybe he'll look out for me, Manuel thought. He smiled, remembering the way the old man would laugh.

That's when he saw him, out of the corner of his eye. *El Viejo de la Bolsa* was there, right there among the tombstones! Tall and thin and dressed in black. Just the way his grandfather had always described him. And he was coming after Manuel!

"Waaaait," a voice called behind him.

But Manuel didn't wait. He took off running. His lungs burned, but he didn't slow down until he was far away from the graves of *el campo santo*.

As the streetlights came on and his breathing returned to normal, Manuel started to feel a little silly. It had probably just been someone visiting a dead relative. Nothing to get all streaked in the shorts over, he told himself. Well, at least he was going to be home in time for dinner.

Suddenly and with no warning, a tall thin man dressed in black appeared five feet in front of him. Manuel was about to take off running again when the man spoke.

"It's good to see you again, Manuel," he said.

Manuel knew that voice, but he hadn't heard it in a long time.

"¿Abuelito? What are you doing here?"

The man reached out his hand. Manuel took it. He wasn't afraid anymore.

"You hit your head pretty hard, Manny," the old man said. "It's time for us to take a little walk back to where you just came from."

As night closed in all around, Manuel and his grandfather walked back to the graveyard.

Live(r) and Let Die

Buster Whitaker had a routine.

"Liver, please," he would tell the lunch lady every day at school.

And every day, the lunch lady got him liver.

Since the other kids hated liver, they didn't much care what Buster had for lunch. But that changed one day in November.

"It's not fair," they started saying. "Why does he get to choose what he wants for lunch?"

Some of them started asking for liver just to see what would happen.

"Ma'am, I would like some liver please."

"Sorry, Missy," the lunch lady said. "It's Taco Salad Day!"

José gave it a shot the next day.

"I would like liver today, please, just like my good friend, Buster," he said, pointing.

"Sorry, that was the last slice."

A small group of fourth and fifth graders huddled together by the wall ball courts at recess. Buster was over on the grass, alone as always.

"Liver every day must be in his contract," someone said in disgust.

"What contract?" Lil' Ray-Ray asked.

"It's a saying, dummy," Bro Jay said. "You know, like Buster wouldn't even come to school unless they had liver waiting for him. Like he's some big shot."

"I'm sick of this special baby treatment," someone else said.

"Hey," Bro Jay said in his whiniest voice. "I want a hot fudge sundae for lunch or I'm gonna cry."

He yelled that last part across the playground and the wind picked up his words and blew them right into Buster. Buster stared at Bro Jay. It was a stare that sent icy chills up and down Bro Jay's spine.

"Punk," Bro Jay muttered.

Lil' Ray-Ray knew that Buster was in for it now.

The next day the group stood together during morning recess.

"Lunch gonna be special today," Bro Jay told them.

Lil' Ray-Ray felt a little sick. He knew Bro Jay had snuck into the cafeteria earlier that morning and stolen all that slimy, disgusting liver. He knew that Buster Whitaker would have to settle for four-cheese macaroni like the rest of them.

"Liver, please," Buster said at lunch.

The red-haired lunch lady stammered and stuttered.

"Uh, uh, well, there's a little problem."

Sweat dripped out of her hair net and down her doughy face.

"We will have your liver soon. Mary Ella is out picking it up right now. We seem to have run out. You just wait over there, hon."

Buster sat alone at a table, waiting.

"Hey, Buster. Did they forget about you?" Bro Jay said, breaking into a huge gut-laugh that filled the cafeteria. "Wanna share my lunch? Or will macaroni give you a rash or something?"

He went and sat down at the table across from Buster's. He dug his fork into his lunch and gave Buster a long look before he took a bite. He could see saliva running down Buster's chin.

"Sick, dude," Bro Jay said, watching gobs of drool drop from Buster's face. "Get yourself some Macaroni—and a napkin."

Bro Jay took another bite. Suddenly, his stomach started aching.

"Ouch," he said, grabbing his gut. Buster glared at him and that seemed to make it worse.

The pain was throbbing. Not exactly his stomach, but next to it, right under his ribs. It burned.

"Maybe you got a point about not eating this macaroni, Buster. It's killing me."

"I want my liver," Buster said, staring at *Bro Jay's*.

Bro Jay didn't know what Buster was saying. All he could hear was his own groaning and moaning.

“Give me my liver!” Buster screamed.

He was still drooling, the slimy saliva dripping down his face.

“I want my liver,” he repeated, his eyes as big as fat harvest moons.

Bro Jay looked at Buster and shivered. Then he lifted up his shirt and looked down at where the pain was coming from. It felt like something was pulling at him. He could see a growing bulge under his skin, next to his stomach. It was his *liver*! Buster was trying to steal it!

Bro Jay began screaming.

Buster just sat there drooling and pulling, drooling and pulling. Bro Jay kept screaming.

The House of Hearne

"All you have to do is bring back the dead bird before the sun comes up," Pete Molson said. "The map will show you where it's buried."

Murray and Freddy nodded.

"Any questions?" Pete Molson said.

"So we bring back the bird and we're members of the House of Hearne?" Murray asked eagerly.

"Yes, before the sun comes up," Pete Molson said. "We'll meet you down by the river at midnight."

Murray and Freddy went home and studied the map.

"Looks like it's about three miles to the island where the bird is buried and three miles back," Murray said. "It shouldn't be too bad."

"Do you think they killed the bird?" Freddy said.

"I don't know," Murray said. "And I don't care."

"And why do we want to join the House of Hearne again?" Freddy asked.

"'Cause there's two kinds of people in this stupid town," Murray said, starting to get mad. "House of Hearners and losers—and I don't want to be a loser, Freddy."

Freddy didn't want to be a loser, but he wasn't so sure he wanted to belong to this club either. If the House of Hearne Explorers Society was as awesome as Murray said, they should be digging for something cool like buried treasure instead of some poor dead bird, Freddy thought. But he knew how much it mattered to his older brother, so he kept his mouth shut.

As midnight approached, the boys packed a knapsack, put some pillows under the covers to make it look like they were sleeping in their beds, and slipped out the bedroom window.

It was a clear and chilly October night. Murray and Freddy walked quickly down to the river. The other boys were waiting for them.

"Here's a shovel," Pete Molson said. "Good luck and, oh, watch out for Davy."

Everyone knew the story of Davy La Boite. Davy La Boite was a boy who had drowned under the town's covered bridge almost 100 years earlier. His body was never found. Soon after the accident, the stories began to surface, each generation adding its own chapter. At some point the last name was changed to *LaBoo* and someone came up with a little nonsense rhyme: "Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe."

According to some, Davy would rise up from his watery grave if someone stood on the bridge and spoke the words backwards. Others said that his ghost would get anyone who passed under the bridge at night without repeating the rhyme three times.

It was a moonless night and it took a few minutes for Freddy's eyes to adjust to the black water out in front of him. The paddle still felt cold in his hands as they approached the covered bridge. It loomed larger and more ominous with each stroke.

"Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe. Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe," Freddy whispered under the bridge's dark shadow. "Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe."

"Don't be such a child," Murray said from the stern. "Ain't no Davy LaBoo."

Freddy paddled hard and with the help of the current they were soon through to the other side.

Suddenly a loud splash came from somewhere behind them.

"What was that?" Freddy asked nervously.

"Probably just a fish," Murray said. "No, I mean, *I'm the ghost of Davy LaBoooooooo coming to get yooooooou*."

"Cut it out, Murray," Freddy said.

They made good progress down the river and reached the lake. Freddy sighed with relief when he saw the small island come into view.

"There it is," Murray said, pointing his flashlight down at the map. "The bird's supposed to be buried somewhere in the center of this island."

They pulled up on a gravelly beach.

“Get the shovel,” Murray said. “Looks like a black rock marks the spot.”

His flashlight cast creepy shadows as the trees closed in all around. Deeper and deeper into the woods they walked in search of the grave of the dead bird.

“There,” Freddy finally said, pointing to a rock.

“I’ll dig first,” Murray said.

The dirt was soft. Soon the shovel hit something.

“Point the light down here,” Murray said getting down on his knees.

He dug at the dirt with his hands and pulled out an old, wooden box. He removed the lid.

“That’s sick,” Freddy said, looking down at the dead bird. It was a big black crow. Its eyes were open and bulging and seemed to be looking right at them. Goose bumps covered Freddy’s arms.

Murray closed the lid and stood up.

“Let’s get going,” he said.

They walked quickly through the forest to the canoe. Murray carefully placed the box down under his seat. They paddled silently back across the lake. Soon they were back on the river. The bridge was up ahead.

All they had to do was get past this bridge and they were home free, Freddy thought. But he had a bad feeling. Dread, like hands closing in around his neck, began to choke him.

“Isn’t there another way we can get back?” he said in a shaky voice.

“You know there’s not,” Murray said. “Suck it up, girlfriend.”

“Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe. Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe,” Freddy said again under the bridge. “Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe.”

“I told you there ain’t no—” Murray said.

Freddy heard a loud splash behind the boat. A second later, the canoe rocked violently.

“Stop messing around, Murray,” Freddy shouted. “You’re gonna flip us.”

Murray didn’t answer.

“Murray? Murray!”

Suddenly a gruesome odor filled Freddy’s nostrils. He turned around slowly. What he saw would stay with him for the rest of his life. There in the back of the canoe, a green-black mass of hair, bone, and rotting flesh stood over Murray. An eerie glow escaping from its empty eye sockets, the thing just stood there dripping with evil.

“Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe. Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe,” Freddy repeated, shutting his eyes tight. “Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe.”

When he looked back again, the ghost of Davy LaBoo had wrapped its limbs around Murray. A moment later they both went over the side and disappeared. Bubbles rose to the surface. At first, Freddy thought he could hear screaming and hideous laughter coming from under the black water. And then everything was quiet again, like nothing had ever happened.

Freddy made it home that night and lived to be a very old man, telling the story to anyone who would listen. Murray was never seen a—**GAAAIN!**

The Ghost of Bruddah Stu

"The Ghost of Bruddah Stu haunts that beach to this day," Molly said. "The story goes that a giant wave hit him so hard, it ripped his head clean off his body. And they never found the head."

"Yeah, and his great ghost body wanders around at midnight of the full moon looking for his surfboard—and his missing head," Jessica added.

"Those are just stories," Linda said, taking a hit off her soda. "Just stories."

"My uncle said he saw the ghost one night when he was a kid," Anna added.

"Your uncle's been eating too much seaweed," Linda said. "Ghosts are like wrestling—they're just not real."

"Hey, there's a full moon tomorrow night," Molly said. "I'll give you $100 if you spend the midnight hour on that beach alone and show us how brave you are."

"$100?" Linda said, trying not to sound too excited. "You've got yourself a deal."

The next night Linda's friends took turns digging a deep pit in the sand with a shovel. It was hard work. They had decided to bury Linda up to her neck to make sure she really stayed at the beach. They would come back at one o'clock to dig her out.

"This hole is back far enough so you don't have to worry about the tide," Molly said after they had covered their friend and stomped down on the sand. "Bruddah Stu is the one you have to look out for."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Linda sighed.

"It's 11:53," Anna said looking at her watch. "We'll come back for you in just over an hour."

Linda watched her friends walk down the beach toward Jessica's house. The beach was deserted. A breeze blew through the sand as the moon climbed higher in the black sky. The waves pounded the shore. There were a few tiny lights out on the water from distant ships.

Linda's feet began to get cold. The sand down there was wet. She had a terrible itch on her nose she couldn't reach because her arms were pinned to her body. It was pretty uncomfortable, but she wasn't afraid. She passed the time thinking how she would spend her $100.

Nothing happened for a long time.

Then suddenly Linda heard splashing somewhere out in the water. A few moments later, she saw a large shape coming out of the ocean.

"It burns," the shadow moaned. "It buuurns…"

At first Linda thought it was just one of the other girls trying to scare her. But as the thing came closer, she could tell it was too big to be one of her friends. Whatever it was, it was heading right toward Linda. Her heart pounded hard against the sand. Her belief that there was no such thing as ghosts was disappearing faster than a sandcastle at high tide.

"It burns," it groaned again. "It buuurns…"

As the large figure closed in, Linda could now clearly see in the moonlight that it had a head. Bruddah Stu had found his head!

Of course it burns, Linda thought with what was left of her mind. *All that salt water seeping into that terrible wound has to burn something awful.*

Too terrified to scream, Linda shut her eyes. The ghost was no more than 10 feet away and getting closer with each step. Its skin appeared red in the moonlight.

"It burns," Bruddah Stu moaned again, now hovering over Linda. "It buuurns…"

Linda's heart almost stopped. She fainted right there in the sand.

A few minutes later, Linda's friends dug her out.

The *ghost* of Bruddah Stu turned out to be nothing more than a large tourist who had jumped in the water to cool off a bad sunburn.

The Girl Who Wouldn't
Marry Nuno Neves

"When Portuguese explorers first saw coconuts it reminded them of the *Coco*, which was their word for a sort of boogeyman-ish ghost or witch," the history professor said. "So you see, because of its brownish, hairy appearance, the coconut was actually named after the boogeyman."

Julia yawned loudly.

"This guy's killing me," she said under her breath.

After class, a student named Nuno came up to her. He always sat in the back, filling up notebooks with hearts and Julia's name.

"This class I like and me like you," he said and smiled. "One day me marry you."

"Get away from me, you creep," Julia said. "Do they just let anyone into this university? I would rather marry—what's his name?—the *Coco*."

Nuno became quiet and looked at the ground. Julia walked away.

A few weeks later the professor made an announcement at the end of class.

"I'm sorry to inform you that one of our students, Nuno Neves, has died. I don't have any other details," he said.

I wonder what happened to that creep, Julia thought and then shook her head. *Must have died from a broken heart.* She had to force herself not to laugh.

The next day a sickly sweet odor filled the old classroom. Julia knew right away what it was because she hated that smell. The room reeked of coconuts.

"Makes me hungry for some curry," the professor said. "And a piña colada."

As the days went by, the smell got stronger and stronger. It started to follow Julia everywhere she went and people even began to think that it was coming from her, that it was some new shampoo or perfume she was wearing. It was on her clothes, her hair, and her skin. And no matter how much she showered or did laundry, it only got stronger.

Julia sat alone in the corner of the cafeteria one afternoon. Suddenly she spit out her milk.

"This tastes like coconut!" she said, looking at the carton and seeing that it was just regular, plain milk.

Soon everything Julia ate tasted like coconuts. She stopped eating and going to her classes. She just stayed in her room day and night.

Weeks later, Julia found herself on a hospital bed. A dark fog covered the room. She thought she heard that song they played at weddings and felt herself being lifted off the bed. She looked down and saw that she was wearing a white dress.

Julia floated down a long hall lined by skeletons. When she stopped, Death stood in front of her with his hood and scythe. In the other hand he held a burning book.

"We are gathered here…" he began.

Julia was too weak to fight, too weak to run, too weak to scream.

"You look lovely, my dear," a ghastly voice whispered in her ear. "The ring, Nuno."

Julia turned behind her and saw Nuno Neves hold out a ring in his gray, dead hand. Horrible, hairy fingers reached out for it. And then for Julia.

She saw the ring slip onto her finger.

"You may now kiss the bride," Death said.

The tuxedoed figure to her side turned and pulled Julia in tight.

Before closing her eyes for the last time, Julia saw the thing with the hairy and hideous brown coconut head lick its lips and…

AAAH!

Sketch

A monument to madness, the old State Mental Hospital sat on a hill overlooking the small town of Josephson, Oregon. Over the years, a lot of questionable experiments had been performed there. The hospital had been closed for more than 10 years now but, according to some, the screams could still be heard on quiet nights.

It didn't take long after the doors closed for the abandoned asylum to become a popular late-night destination for teenagers looking for a break from the boredom of small-town life. And it didn't take long for stories surrounding the place to sprout like the weeds that covered the dead lawn.

Shadows without explanations. The ghost of a young nurse who had gone down to the basement for some bandages and was never seen again. Bodies buried in unmarked graves in the woods behind the main building rising up at midnight. And, of course, the screaming.

But on this night, Ray and the other three boys were interested in something else.

They climbed the fence and crawled in through one of the many broken windows. Sam led the way since he had the only flashlight. They were headed to Room 202. Room 202 was supposed to be the room of one of the hospital's most infamous patients, Pierre "Sketch" Benoit. He got his nickname from the drawings of victims he left behind at crime scenes. The bodies were never found, just the sketches.

When he was finally caught, Benoit confessed to 27 murders. No one had any reason to doubt him—or that he was completely insane.

The boys sat in a circle. A candle flickered in the middle, throwing their shadows on the walls.

"Pierre, Pierre, appear from thin air," they began. "Benoit, Benoit, where are ya?"

"It's not going to work unless we hold hands," Bob said.

"Perfect," Ray sighed, sticking out his arms. "That's exactly how I wanted to spend my Friday night, holding hands with you losers."

"Pierre, Pierre, appear from thin air," they chanted. "Benoit, Benoit, where are ya?"

"Wait, I think I feel something," Sam said, leaning to his right. A loud noise bounced off the tile floor beneath him and a rotting smell filled the air.

"Sick, man!" Carl said. "Keep it to yourself."

After a good laugh, the boys went back to their chanting.

"Pierre, Pierre, appear from thin air. Benoit, Benoit, where are ya?"

After several minutes it became clear that nothing was going to happen.

"Pierre has left the building," Bob said, sounding disappointed. "I guess we weren't worthy."

Carl blew out the candle and Sam switched on the flashlight. They all stood up and shuffled toward the door, Ray bringing up the rear. Suddenly Sam turned around and pushed Ray back into the middle of the room. Then he slammed the door shut. The sound echoed up and back down the hall. It was as dark as the inside of a coffin in that cell.

From out in the hall, the boys laughed.

"Okay, good one, Sam," Ray said. "Real funny. Now let me out."

Ray pushed on the door and Sam pulled on the handle from his side, but nothing happened. It was stuck.

All four of them tried it.

"One, two, three…"

The door wouldn't budge.

"We'll look around for something to help pry it open," Sam said. "Sit tight."

"Where would I go?" Ray said. He heard the boys go down the hall and then it got quiet.

He could smell the smoke from the candle. *Too bad Bob's got the matches*, he thought.

After a few minutes, his eyes started to adjust to the dark. He could make out the bed and the crumbling ceiling and the door. He walked around and looked at some of the sketches that still covered most of the walls. It was all pretty creepy, but it would take a lot more to scare him. *I ain't some mama's boy*, he thought. Still, Ray wished his friends would hurry.

Then with a squeak, the door slowly swung open.

Ray was about to say something like “it’s about time,” when he noticed that no one was there. The door had opened by itself. He thought he heard someone whisper his name. Then he felt a chill pass through him.

A few minutes later, the other boys found Ray standing in the hall outside the room.

“Ray?” Carl said. “Is that you?”

“No, it’s Pierre,” Ray said staring at the light from the flashlight.

“I’m glad you still have a sense of humor about it,” Sam said. “How’d you get out of there, man?”

Ray didn’t answer.

Sam talked quickly and nervously during the drive back to town. He felt bad about playing that trick. Ray didn’t say a word. He just sat there. To Sam it looked like he was far away, deep in thought.

“See you later, Ray-*der*,” Sam said when they pulled up in front of Ray’s house.

Ray didn’t answer. Sam put his hand on his friend’s shoulder. Ray turned to face him.

It’s almost like he doesn’t know who I am, Sam thought.

Ray then got out of the car and walked slowly toward his house.

“Must still be mad,” Bob said as he took Ray’s place up front.

“Yeah,” Carl said from the back seat. “Hard not to be.”

Sam wasn’t so sure that was it.

Ray unlocked the door and went inside.

“Hey, Ray,” his mother said from the living room. “Did you and your pals have a good time?”

He went up the stairs.

“Ray?”

Ray walked into his room without bothering to turn on the light. He sat at his desk and took out a notebook and a pencil. He stared out at the darkness. And then he started sketching Sam’s dead face.

It's a Wrap

Billy Bob and Bobbie Jo were parked up where Old Mill Road dead ends at the southern tip of Lake Boudreaux. It was a quiet, moonlit night in late April—still too early for swimming but just right for pondering. The two sweethearts were talking about their plans after high school.

"I'm glad you're going to college," Billy Bob said.

"Wish you'd come too," Bobbie Jo said.

"I just don't kno—" Billy Bob said and stopped.

There was a loud whining sound and then a metal-meets-bone crunching followed by horrible screaming.

"What was that?" Bobbie Jo asked bug-eyed, sliding closer to Billy Bob.

"It sounded like it came from the old mill," he said. "But that place's been closed for years."

Everything was quiet again.

Then a few moments later a heavy thump rocked the bed of Billy Bob's pickup truck. When he and Bobbie Jo looked back, they couldn't believe their eyes. It looked like a body! It was just sitting there, wrapped in bloody bandages from head to toe.

"Help meeee," it moaned.

And then it started to move toward them.

"Get us out of here!" Bobbie Jo yelled.

Frozen by fear, Billy Bob could only stare.

"Come on!" she said, punching Billy Bob hard on the arm.

Billy Bob started the truck and took off.

The thing in the bandages moved closer and closer until it was just outside the window. Bobbie Jo could now see its face, covered except for the eyes. Those terrible eyes pleaded with her.

"Help meeee," it moaned again, pounding on the glass.

As the truck flew faster and faster down the winding road back to town, it hit a bump. Bobbie Jo bounced up and hit her head. When she looked behind her again, the thing wasn't there.

"I think it's gone," she said, breathless.

"What do you mean, gone?" Billie Bob said.

"It's not there," Bobbie Jo said.

"I don't care," Billie Bob said. "I'm not slowing down till we get to town."

A few minutes later, the pickup truck stopped at *Elmore's Gas 'n Git*. Billie Bob and Bobby Jo got out and walked slowly toward the back. There was nothing there. Billie Bob kept staring at the back of the truck.

"Did we just imagine that?" Bobbie Jo said.

Billie Bob shook his head.

"That would work except for two things," he said as he picked something out of the truck bed. "For starters, my 'magination's not that good."

"What's the other reason?" Bobbie Jo asked.

Billie Bob held up what he had just found in the back of the truck.

It was a bloody bandage.

They're Coming For You 3
Scary Stories that Scream
to be Read… Thrice

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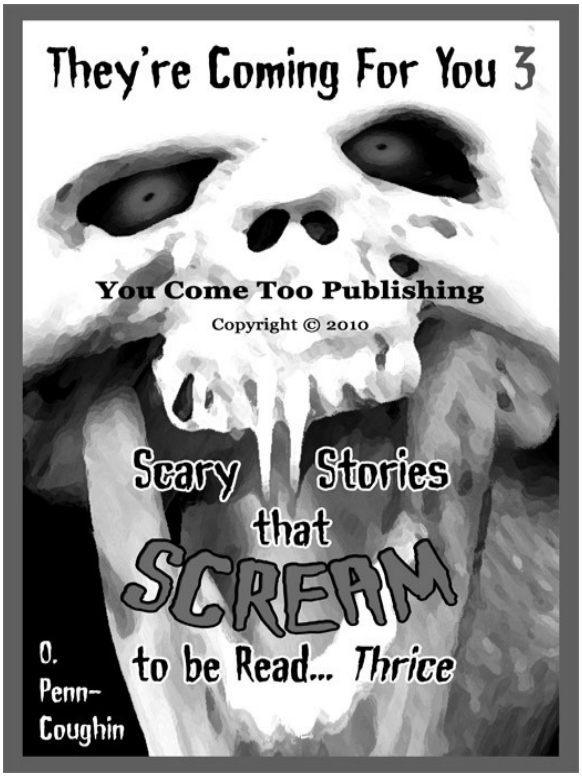
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Scary Stories that SCREAM to be Read... Thrice
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For all the good teachers,
You are so outnumbered
and so gravely needed

Introduction

The stories in this series are meant to be enjoyed alone or shared with others. If needed, some of them include instructions **[like this]** on when to scream. As always though, feel free to scream at any time. If you think it'll help. **AAAH!**

O. Penn-Coughin

Going Down

The elevator doors opened and Louis stepped in. The only other passenger was a little old woman. She had a shawl pulled over her head and Louis couldn't see her face. But there was something familiar about her.

The elevator slowly made its way down, down, down to the lobby. Louis and the old woman rode in silence. When the metal box stopped, nothing happened. The doors didn't open. Louis waited patiently. In all his 58 years, he had never been scared of elevators or of tight spaces. But Louis was suddenly gripped with the feeling that he had to get out. He pushed the "open" button several times. Nothing happened.

Then Louis pushed all the buttons. Again, nothing happened. The old woman seemed untroubled.

"Come on," Louis said in a shaky voice. "Come on."

He began pounding on the doors.

"Get me out of here!" he shouted as the doors continued to remain closed.

The old woman then reached over with a trembling, bony hand and pressed the button that read "basement." The elevator began to move. A few moments later the basement light lit up. But the elevator did not stop. It kept moving. Louis could feel it dropping down, down, down.

"We've reached the bottom," Louis shouted. "How could we still be going down?"

"Oh, we're not at the bottom quite yet, Louis," the old woman said.

Louis knew that voice. He grabbed the old woman and spun her around to see her face.

It was the face of his dead mother. Her small eyes danced with evil.

"I was a bad mother and you were a bad son," she whispered horribly. "I've arranged it so that we can spend more time together. Now we'll have all the time in the world. All the time in the wooooooorld."

Louis dropped to his knees and cried and the elevator kept going down, down, down…

The Geek
Shall Inherit the Earth

"Hey, Tomato Head, good weekend?" Cameron yelled as Jen passed by on Monday morning. His friends, who were gathered around waiting for the bell to ring, all laughed.

For Jen Andrews, life had become as gloomy as the cold, wet winter that surrounded her each morning on the way to school. Nothing was going right. Her best friend had moved away. She kept getting bad grades on her math tests. And she started wearing large red-rimmed glasses that felt strange on her face.

Then, of course, there was Cameron: a mean, skinny fifth grader who took great delight in tormenting quiet and scared fourth graders every day before and after school. Lately, Jen had become one of his favorite targets.

"Hey, Bubble Butt, I'm talking to you!" he yelled.

Nothing ever stopped Cameron either. It seemed like the more teachers made him stay in for recess for "rude behavior," the more he lashed out, seeking revenge on whoever had spilled their guts.

One gray morning, Jen felt worse and worse as she walked to school. She kept thinking of all the bad stuff that was going on and couldn't think of any solutions. As she crossed the street, she felt a darkness start to grow inside her stomach. By the time she got to school, the strange feeling had spread throughout her entire body.

The new feeling was so powerful that as she rounded the corner and saw Cameron, all freckles and smirks, she didn't look to the ground like she usually did. She stared right into Cameron's mean eyes.

"Hey, Tomato Head. What's for lunch?"

Jen kept staring until Cameron looked away.

Strange, Jen thought. He usually bugs me until I get to class.

All day long Jen noticed that things seemed different. She didn't know what it was, but she liked how strong and brave she felt. She played soccer at recess and scored a goal. And in math, she finally learned how to divide. It was a great day!

But there was Cameron waiting for her on the sidewalk after school.

"Hey, Big Butt, wait up," he screeched, jogging over to her.

He was by himself.

"They'll have to fit your butt with glasses too so it can see where it's going," he said.

But surprisingly, Cameron's words had no effect on her like they usually did. They just rolled out of his mouth and fell to the ground. Inside, she just felt different. She stared at him, stared for a long time, saying nothing. She was so focused that she barely noticed that he had started crying.

"What did you do to me?" he screamed at her. "What did you do?"

As Cameron ran away down the street, Jen noticed that his own butt now seemed huge—far too big for his ripped pants.

She wasn't sure what was happening.

But she had a powerful feeling it was going to be a good year.

Cooked Goose

Dave was trying to drive while at the same time talking on the phone, drinking his gingerbread latte coffee, and switching the radio station.

He never saw the goose cross the road.

A moment later he heard the thud.

"What was that?" he said. "No, not you, Larry. Let me call you back."

He stopped his car and got out. There it was in the middle of the street, feathers and blood all over the place. Somehow the goose was still alive. But it didn't take a veterinarian to know it wasn't going to make it.

Dave didn't want the animal to suffer any more than it already had. He grabbed it around the head and gave a good twist. He had intended to snap its neck, but he used a little too much force. The head came off in his hand, more blood shooting up from the neck.

"Ah, man," Dave said. "What a mess."

Now he felt doubly bad. He thought that he should do something, maybe give the goose a proper burial. But he didn't want to stain his trunk.

He went back to the car and got the coffee cup. He gulped down what was left. Then he took off the lid and placed the head inside.

"I hope you understand," he said, first looking down at the head and then at the body. "Both of you."

He got back in the car, placed the cup in the holder, and drove off.

He buried the head in a corner of the backyard where the cats liked to do their business. He said a few words.

That night Dave had a nightmare.

In the dream the goose was angry.

"That was wrong," it hissed. "Wrong."

Dave then felt a terrible stretching sensation around his neck.

In the morning Dave woke and the first thing that he saw was the goose head on the pillow by his head. It had the same angry expression from the nightmare.

"You again," Dave said. "You're becoming a real pain in the neck."

He reached up to rub the soreness above his shoulders but couldn't. He tried again. Again, nothing happened. He just couldn't reach his neck.

"Wait a minute," Dave said. "What's going on here?"

He then looked down. An expression of pure horror covered his face. The scream got stuck in his throat.

His body was gone. It wasn't on the bed. It wasn't anywhere. Dave was just a head!

Just like the goose next to him, he was just a head!

AAAH!

Werewithal

The bear appeared on the far shore. It stood there, untroubled by the pouring rain, eating from a shrub at the river's edge. Ethan and his dad didn't say a word. They just watched in awe.

Suddenly a motor boat came into view. The roar of the rapids drowned out the noise of its engine. While one man steered the little skiff through the turbulent and rocky waters, the one near the bow stood and raised a rifle. He had the bear in his sights.

"Noooo!" Ethan shouted over the sound of the water.

The bear moved and then a shot rang out. And another. The bear became a blur, disappearing into the thick, wet forest.

The boat made its way over to them.

"How-dee," the helmsman said. "What brings you this way?"

"On vacation," Ethan's dad said.

The rifleman nodded slowly, glaring at Ethan, the weapon still in his hands. The two men looked dirty. It was easy to look dirty out in the wilderness, but this was the kind of dirty that didn't wash off with soap, Ethan thought.

"Well, we'll get the next one, sonny," the shooter said, grinning with white, sharp, perfect teeth. His eyes, though, seemed to glow with a hatred that shot deep into Ethan's soul.

"Don't lose any sleep over dat."

They both gave another half-hearted farewell nod and the boat continued upriver. Ethan and his father stood there in the mud and rain watching it until it disappeared.

"Those guys were kinda creepy," Ethan said. "The rifle seemed to be the least scary thing about them."

"I know what you mean," his dad said. "Well, come on. We have a couple more big rapids to portage around today."

While his dad lifted their green canoe over his head, Ethan shouldered the heavy backpack. He bent down to pick up the paddles. As they walked down the muddy trail, he replayed the incident in his mind. He worried about the next bear the hunters would meet.

That night Ethan had a nightmare. In the dream the hunters had turned into werewolves. Shapeshifting werewolves.

In the morning Ethan poked his head out the tent. Two loons swam on the foggy lake. Frost covered the ground. But as he stumbled outside, something else caught his eye.

There, right in front of their tent, was a bird head. The severed head of a large bird, maybe a falcon. The sight of it sent a chill down Ethan's spine that had nothing to do with the low temperature.

"Do you think it was those guys?" Ethan asked.

"I don't know what to think," his dad said sounding a little nervous.

"Man, I had a nasty nightmare last night," Ethan said. "And now this."

"I had one too," his dad said. "What was yours about?"

"Those hunters had turned into—"

"Shapeshifting werewolves?" his dad said, finishing the sentence.

"How could you know that?" Ethan said.

"Because I had the same dream," his dad answered. "Let's get the hell out of here."

It wasn't supposed to be the last day of their ten-day Saskatchewan trip, but neither one of them wanted to stay out here one moment longer than necessary, certainly not another night.

They were still about 25 miles away from their car. It would be a long day, but it could be done.

By midafternoon they reached Nipew Lake. The lake took its name, meaning dead in Cree, from a smallpox epidemic that swept through the area in the late 1700s. The wind had picked up like it usually did at that time of

day. Small whitecaps already blanketed the water. Normally these were the types of conditions that would cause his dad to start looking for a campsite or at least a place to wait it out.

"It's blowing against us," his dad said. "But it's nothing we haven't done before."

They both knew that if the wind got strong enough, it could transform a big lake like this into a raging cauldron. An open canoe would have no chance. They would swamp for sure. His dad always made Ethan wear his life vest. This time he did too. They shoved off.

It was always safer to hug the shore when out on a large body of water, but since the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, they paddled down the middle of the lake, sometimes finding themselves almost a mile from the nearest shore.

After a while Ethan turned around to look behind them. In the distant shadows of the forest, he thought he caught a glimpse of a pair of eyes. They glowed in the dark just like the bear hunter's had. Ethan shuddered with fright and drew in a long, uneven breath like a scared little boy.

The wind began to rage and howl, and at some point Ethan started hearing voices.

"It's no use," they said. "No use, little boy, no uuuse…"

Ethan tried to convince himself that it was the wind playing tricks on him. He focused on the job at hand as best he could, but there was true horror in the sound and in his heart.

"No use, little boy, no uuuse…"

Larger and larger waves washed over the bow with increasing frequency, the cold water taking Ethan's breath away. The canoe—heavy from the water it was taking on—rode lower and lower in the growing waves.

It seemed impossible that they could hold on much longer.

Yet somehow they did. They paddled like this for what seemed like an hour. Finally, the trees and rock shelves on the far shore began to get more defined. Closer. A little closer with every stroke. Relief washed over them and they began to talk again.

"We just might make it," his dad said. "If you don't sink us with the weight of all your pee."

"Have some," Ethan shouted back as he cupped a handful of water from the bottom of the canoe, flipping it over his shoulder.

A few more short portages and a few more miles on the river and they were at the car.

The sun had gone down by the time they made it to their Jeep. The little parking lot was dark and quiet. Ethan's dad put his palm over the hood and bowed his head. Ethan just smiled.

He loaded the gear into the back of the SUV while his father strapped the canoe to the roof. The car rocked as he pulled hard on the lines. They were soon on the dirt road that would take them to the paved road that would take them to civilization.

Ethan began to think about the trip and then stopped. He heard something. The voices were back.

"It's no use," they said again. "No use, little boy, no uuuse—"

Suddenly there was a loud exploding pop and the car jerked to the left. Ethan jumped off the seat. His father pulled the car to the side of the road.

"That was kind of scary, huh?" he said, sighing deeply. "I think we've got a flat."

They got out to look at the damage. It was moonless and hard to see, no end of stars filling the cold sky.

As they got busy digging in the back for a flashlight and the spare and the jack, a car pulled up behind them. It had its lights off.

Two men got out.

Cold, sweaty fingers of fear clutched Ethan's throat. He fought to breathe. It had to be the hunters. They walked toward the Jeep. Through the dark Ethan could make out that they didn't have rifles.

Maybe it's someone else, Ethan thought hopefully. At least it's not a full moon.

And then Ethan saw those eyes again, cutting through the dark, coming closer. The men both smiled, their long, white teeth biting into the darkness.

A moment later they were on top of his father.

"Run, Ethan, run!" was the last thing he heard his dad say.

Terrible screams and inhuman shrieks ripped through the night as Ethan ran through the forest.

Ethan ran and ran and ran until all he could hear was the beating of his own heart pounding in his ears. He finally stopped and stood still for a long time. Tears rolled down his cheeks onto the forest floor. It was now as dark and quiet as death.

Suddenly Ethan heard footsteps coming his way.

"Ethan?" a voice whispered. "Ethan."

It was his father.

"Dad," Ethan said, overcome with emotion. "How did you get away?"

His dad stepped closer and snarled, "I didn't."

It was one of the things.

Ethan took off running again. And again he heard the voices, closing in.

"No use, little boy, no uuuse."

Ethan was more certain at that moment than at any other time in his life. He was sure the voices were right. It was no use.

"No use, little boy, no uuuse…"

He kept running anyway.

[Start breathing hard, pause, breathe some more, and then… SCREAM!]

Harry Potter
Can Bite Me

Little Gregory Podder was sick of it. He just couldn't take it anymore.

Every other kid in school seemed to be calling him "Harry Potter." His favorite teacher had done it, and now his best friend John was even doing it.

It was "Harry Potter" this and "Harry Potter" that.

"Here comes Harry Potter" and "There goes Harry Potter."

"What's up, Harry Potter?" and "I love your new movie, Harry Potter."

It didn't do any good to explain that his first name was Greg not Harry and that his last name was spelled with two d's not two t's. And it sure didn't matter that he didn't want to be called Harry Potter. Those things were beside the point.

The point seemed to be that people were just plain stupid and that any excuse was good enough to keep saying, "Harry Potter, Harry Potter, Harry Potter!"

"I wish I were a vampire," Little Gregory Podder finally said one day. "I would bite them till they stopped."

But wishing wasn't going to do squat. What was needed was some research and some action.

How do I become a vampire? Little Gregory Podder asked himself. How do I become a vampire?

He googled it when he got home.

A lot of nonsense came up like usual. There were no end of websites and articles on the subject. There was even a vampire academy that charged $666. It was all nonsense.

"This is a huge waste of time," he said out loud.

But as he was staring at the screen and thinking how his life really sucked, Little Gregory Podder saw a tiny ad on the lower right hand corner.

It read, "Real Live Vampire for Hire: $99 a night."

Little Gregory Podder dialed the number. A gravelly-voiced man answered.

Little Gregory Podder explained the situation.

"You're breaking my heart, kid," the man said in a New York accent. "But what do you need done?"

"I need it to stop," Little Gregory Podder said. "I just need it to stop."

"Yeah, I get that, but it's not as simple as that," the man said. "You have to be more specific, such as 'Bite so-and-so or scare the living daylights out of Joe Blow or Suzi Quatro.'"

"I don't know Suzi Quatro and I guess I don't really want to hurt anyone," Little Gregory Podder said.

"I know," the man said. "You just want it to stop."

"Yeah," Little Gregory Podder said. "How about if you come to Back-to-School Night and just talk to them?"

"Talk to them?" the man said. "Well, it's your money, kid."

On Back-to-School Night the vampire waited outside the school. He was a short round man with hardly any hair.

Little Gregory Podder walked up to him.

"Are you the vampire?" he asked.

"That's me, kid," the vampire said. "You got the money?"

Little Gregory Podder handed over the $99.

"By the way, I don't think being called Harry is all that bad," the vampire said rubbing his scalp.

Everyone gathered in the gym and the principal said a few words. Just not few enough.

"Remember to support our yo-yo cookie dough sale," she said. "We're trying to raise money to buy new band uniforms. And now you are free to visit your child's—"

At that moment the vampire flew on stage and took the microphone.

"Yeah, whatever you do, don't forget to support that yo-yo cookie dough sale," he said. "Oh, allow me to introduce myself. I am Joe the Vampire. I was invited here by Gregory Podder."

Joe the Vampire proceeded to do a series of card, yo-yo, and magic tricks that wowed the crowd. The closing number just about brought the house down. He sawed the principal in half and pulled cookie dough from her stomach, throwing chucks of it out into the audience.

Everyone stood and cheered.

"That was just the best!" the principal said, pulling herself together. "Thank you so much for making this possible, Greg."

"Gre-gor-y!" the crowd started chanting. "Gre-gor-y!"

"Oh, one more thing," Joe the Vampire said. "Greg would really appreciate you not calling him Harry Potter anymore. I came here today to ask you nice. Next time I might not be so nice. Thanks and good night."

The crowd cheered again and again chanted, "Gre-gor-y! Gre-gor-y! Gre-gor-y!"

"Hey, kid," Joe the Vampire said to Little Gregory Podder after it was over. "You wanna go see a movie?"

"That sounds cool," Little Gregory Podder said. "What do you want to see?"

"I think that new Harry Potter movie is still playing," Joe the Vampire said. "I just love me some Harry Potter. Don't you?"

At that moment Little Gregory Podder turned as green as Frankenstein.

"Just pulling your leg, kid," Joe the Vampire said. "I'm an RPat man all the way."

Hold the Pepperoni,
For We are Many

The two boys had been fishing at Devil's Lake all day without anything to show for it.

"Let's try that spot under those cliffs," Matthew said. "Fish like the shade."

"It's worth a shot," Luke said, sighing deeply as he started the boat motor.

A few minutes later they had their lines in the dark water. Half an hour went by. The fish were just not cooperating.

Suddenly there was a thunderous rumbling from the cliffs. It sounded like lightning or a stampede of buffalo. Moments later a huge cloud of dust rose in the sky. The boys put down their poles and looked up. And then they saw it.

An animal flew off the edge of the cliff. It was at least 100 feet down to the water. The animal dropped awkwardly through the air.

"Look!" Matthew said, pointing.

More followed. In an instant the sky was full. There were hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of them.

"They're pigs," Luke said, not believing what he was seeing. "Pigs!"

The pigs started hitting the water with incredible thuds. Great sprays of water shot in the air. The majority of the animals splashed down near the shore, but some of them landed just a few feet away from the boat.

"This is insane," Matthew said. "What could have gotten into them?"

"Let's see how many we can rescue," Luke said.

He motored over to a group of three pigs that were swimming toward them.

"Look, there's a boat coming toward us," the blue-eyed pig said. "Act helpless when they get closer."

"I've got the one in the back," the second pig said.

"I'll take the other one," the first pig said.

"Hey, what about me?" the third pig said. "I didn't survive that fall for you two to leave me here in this Satan-forsaken lake."

"Don't worry," the second one said. "There's plenty of room inside that chubby kid for both of us."

It took a great effort, but the boys managed to pull the pigs on board. With the extra weight, the boat now sat low in the water.

"Man, that was work right there," Matthew said, breathing hard. "But they seem to be in pretty good shape."

"Yeah," Luke said, wiping the sweat off his face. "Hey, look at the way that one is staring at you. I think it's in love."

"Yo mama's in lo—" Matthew began to say and then stopped.

He felt strange. He wasn't himself anymore. Then he felt nothing. His brown eyes turned blue.

"What's the matter?" Luke said.

Matthew didn't answer.

A moment later something took control of Luke. Something evil. No, it wasn't one thing. It was two.

The boys threw the pigs back in the water, smiled at each other fiendishly, and headed back to town.

The Phone Call

Dudley Pointer wasn't crazy.

But others thought he was. Ever since his wife had died, people had thought he'd gone off the deep end.

Sure, sometimes he liked to go swimming in the city fountains. The police kept telling him that he couldn't do that, but it was hot out. What did they expect?

Or sometimes Dudley would get upset at the bistro where he ate lunch every day when they didn't properly cook the food he ordered. It was all those germs, you see. If you didn't cook something through, you could get sick and die. They didn't seem to understand that, though. He had to keep telling them.

Then one day, a few months after his wife's death, their son Jonathan came to see him. Along with a man dressed in a white lab coat.

"Pop, they're going to take care of you there. They'll make sure you get the help you need," Jonathan said as they dragged Dudley out of his apartment building and put him into a big black car. "Don't worry, you'll be okay."

But okay Dudley wasn't. The Linda Vista Hospital for the Mentally Ill was no vacation. As Dudley found out, the people there were actually insane. Not just eccentric like himself. These people were mental. Some had actually killed people, and others were really violent. The halls of Linda Vista were always filled with screaming.

It didn't take long for Dudley to realize that he needed to get out of there. Aside from the crazy patients, there were the doctors and nurses that fed him no end of pills to keep him calm. The drugs made Dudley's world gray and hazy.

And if people refused to take the pills, there were worse things they would do. Terrible things.

Dudley needed to get out. And soon, before the place actually made him crazy. He'd already lost track of how long he'd been there. He came up with a plan.

One night, when the screams had finally died down and the halls were empty of nurses, Dudley tiptoed out of his room. He walked down the hallway to the security guard's station.

Just like he had noticed on other evenings, Ralph was in his seat, snoring. Dudley quietly lifted the keys attached to the belt loop without waking him up. He walked down a side hallway, opening the metal door to the stairs with one of the keys.

He could almost taste his freedom.

Dudley ran down another hallway and could then see the parking lot from a glass door. He pushed against the door, but it was locked. Dudley quickly searched through the keys on the key ring, looking for the right one. He tried them all, but none of them opened the door.

He was so close.

And then the building's alarms went off. They must have noticed him missing. Dudley's time was just about up.

He suddenly noticed a phone hanging from the wall in the hallway. A thought came to him. If he couldn't get out of this insane asylum on his own, maybe he could reason with his son. If Jonathan only knew the terrible things that went on in this place, he'd have to get him out.

Dudley threw the keys down and picked up the phone. He dialed Jonathan's number quickly, glancing over his shoulder to see if they were coming.

It rang a few times until finally Dudley heard his son's voice on the other end.

"Hello?"

"Johnny, it's your father. Listen, you have to help me get out of this place."

"Hello? Who is this?"

"It's me, your father. I don't have much time, you have to help me. They do terrible things in here. I'm not crazy, Johnny! You have to get me out of here!" Dudley yelled into the phone.

He heard footsteps running toward him.

There was silence on the other end.

"Johnny, help me! Get me out of this—"

And then they grabbed Dudley. His screams echoed through the hospital as they dragged him away.

"I don't belong here! I don't belong here! I don't belong here!"

***

Jonathan Pointer hung up the phone. It was the third time in two weeks that he'd gotten a call like this. He'd answer, and there'd only be static on the other end. The number that showed up on the caller ID was always the same. He traced it once.

The operator said the calls were coming from inside the building where the Linda Vista hospital had stood before they tore it down all those years ago.

Jonathan didn't regret committing his father. He'd had to. Dudley Pointer had become a violent man after Jonathan's mother died. He had snapped, and Jonathan knew he needed help.

But he still felt guilty, even today, over the way his father died as he tried to escape from Linda Vista. Dudley had beaten up and nearly killed a security guard to get the keys to the place. He had been shot just as he was trying to leave through the south entrance out into the parking lot.

That had been more than forty years ago.

Small Room

Perhaps it was the challenge of it. The young couple had never seen such an old house and they were intrigued by its mystery and character. It had dark wood floors that sucked all the light up, windows that were broken, and walls that were covered with peeling paint. It would be quite the job to fix it up, but they were excited and had a vision. And at such a great low price, how could they afford not to buy it?

They moved in and got to work. They decided to begin downstairs in the living room and dining room. Also, they would organize the small room at the end of the hall and make it into an office.

Two months later, the living room and dining room were finished and looked beautiful. The walls had been painted and bright new wood floors had been installed. They were very proud.

They decided to split up to make things go faster. Jane would finish the small room while Bob worked upstairs.

Bob had scraped off all the old paint in the master bedroom before he began to wonder how Jane was doing. It was odd that she wasn't playing any music like she usually did.

"How's it going down there?" Bob called out.

There was no answer.

"Jane?"

Still no answer. Bob went downstairs and walked to the small room. The door was closed. He tried to push it open, but something was in the way. That's when he realized that it was Jane.

"Jane!" he yelled.

He squeezed into the room, and found her lying unconscious on the floor. He grabbed her and gently slapped her face. When she came to, she couldn't remember what had happened.

"Did you hit your head on something? Are you okay? Did you fall off the chair?" Bob asked, Jane just shook her head.

"I don't remember anything," she said as he helped her walk over to the kitchen table. She sat down in a chair while he got her some water.

"I just remember that I was arranging boxes of books, and having a strange feeling, like somebody was watching me."

When Bob heard this, he made a thorough inspection of the house, checking all the rooms and doors. He checked their valuables. There was no evidence of a break-in. Bob didn't know what to make of it.

"I think we should stay out of that room," Jane said.

"You must have slipped off a chair and hit your head," he said.

"We shouldn't go in there anymore!" Jane said.

Bob thought about it for a moment. Jane wasn't thinking too clearly. They had just bought the house and now she wanted to close up this room forever.

"Let's do this. I'll finish up in there, and you work in our bedroom," he said.

At the end of the day, Bob met Jane upstairs.

"Did you finish?" she asked.

"Yes, it looks good," he said.

Jane didn't go in to see it. She wasn't ever going to go into that room again.

Over the next few days, Bob began to act strangely. He seemed grumpy and upset, even though he declared that nothing was wrong. Jane became worried. She had never seen this side of Bob and wondered if he had been working too hard on the house. He was mean, saying things that she thought he would never say. His eyes looked strange too and he never seemed to sleep or bathe anymore.

"Nag, nag, nag!" he yelled, after she asked him to change the light bulb in the bathroom. "I've married an annoying old hag!"

When they were painting the spare room upstairs, he seemed in an especially foul mood. Jane decided to work in the kitchen for a little while.

"Make me a sandwich while you're down there!" he said in an angry voice. "I'm starving!"

"All right," she said.

Jane thought about Bob as she made lunch. He sure had changed. Maybe it was just the pressure of fixing up this house.

Suddenly, she remembered the mortgage. She wasn't sure if Bob had paid it. That would be terrible if they had forgotten. She had last seen the checkbook next to the computer in the office, right before she fainted.

She would have to ask Bob to go into the office and get it and she sure wasn't looking forward to that. He would yell at her for sure. Just as she started heading upstairs, she put down the plate.

"I'm just going to get it myself," she said out loud. "I'll just have to be brave. Beats dealing with him."

She crept down the long hallway and opened the door. A terrible odor rushed up, making her gag and almost vomit, like a rat had died in there. She flipped on the light. In the corner was Bob, dead—very dead—with flies buzzing around his rotting corpse. It looked like he had been there for a while.

"Oh, my God!" Jane whispered, backing out of the room. She started to let out a scream, but held her hand to her mouth.

"Where's my freakin' sandwich!" Bob suddenly yelled from upstairs. "Oh, never mind! I'll be down there in a minute!"

All the Pretty Zombies

Zach Seborhea was the world's first ever zombie scientist. He was a zombie. And he was a scientist. He was a zombie scientist.

"Zombies are at a distinct disadvantage in today's monster-friendly society," he said one day. "Their brains are toast and they're butt ugly."

"I can't do anything about the first one, but I have an idea on how to make us better looking."

So Zach Seborhea began working on a formula to make zombies pretty. First he experimented on zombie mice. After countless failed attempts, he finally came up with a cream that made the mice extremely handsome. But then they died.

"I think their fried zombie mice minds couldn't stand the shock of the transformation," he said to his assistant. "I'll just have to try it out on myself."

Zach Seborhea applied the cream to his butt-ugly face.

"What the heck," he said, rubbing some on his face-ugly butt as well.

At first nothing happened. Then he felt a terrible burning. And then…

"You look so pretty, master," he heard his assistant say. "Make now me pretty too."

He had done it! He had done it!

He soon opened "Zach Seborhea's Zombie Beauty College."

Zombies lined up around the block waiting for their jars of "Zach Seborhea's Pretty Zombie Cream."

After that, it didn't take long for zombies to take over the world. There wasn't even a war. Vampires didn't stand a chance. Sure, they were still smarter, but they no longer were the prettiest monsters in town. And that made all the difference.

The bodies started piling up. Wooden stakes and garlic powder had nothing to do with it. The vampires were dying of natural causes.

They were dying of broken hearts. Their girlfriends had all left them for those pretty tuxedo-wearing zombies.

Booey, hooey, hooey…

Field Trip

We stood around the giant tombstone. Nobody was bored and nobody was talking.

Julio knocked me in the side with his elbow.

"This is some strange field trip," he said.

The tombstone was standing upright on a table and a man was holding a hose that blasted sand into the granite slab, engraving it. Julio was right. Mrs. Jones had sure topped herself this time: tombstone artist. Now that's a career.

"It's important to know the different career choices available to you," she had said at the beginning of the semester to our freshman class.

Soon the crazy field trips began. We went to a car dealership and the courthouse. Then to a bank, a bridal store, and an Italian restaurant. Now, at the beginning of spring, we stood in a large warehouse watching how tombstones were made.

The guy with the hose turned it off so our guide could speak.

"This one here is for Mrs. Edwards," he said.

The man had a huge gut and long, gray sideburns that looked freakish and was wearing a dirty blue apron.

"The sand is being blasted out at such a powerful force that it's able to cut through the thick granite. Granite is one of the strongest materials in our world, you know. This is the only way we can cut through it to engrave our product here."

In a few minutes the man had finished.

Edna Edwards
1919-2010
Beloved Wife, Mother, and Grandmother
In Our Hearts Forever
RIP

"Any questions?" asked Blue Apron.

Julio raised his hand.

"How much do these cost?" he asked.

"It's all included in the mortuary package," Blue Apron said, annoyed. "Who else?"

"Do you know how Edna Edwards died?" James asked.

"Well, yes we do, but we're not supposed to tell." Blue Apron said, looking around for our teacher.

Mrs. Jones was standing away from us all, reading something on her phone. He smiled and then whispered.

"Brain cancer. It just ate her brain away. Kind of like little bugs in there," he said, tapping his own skull.

"Okay, well, thank you," said Mrs. Jones. "Students, we need to move along. Tombstones aren't the only thing Michael's Engraving makes. Come on, out the door to the next building. Single file please."

I was last in line, waiting to move but it was taking forever.

Suddenly something touched my shoulder.

"What?" I said out loud, turning and expecting one of my friends. But nobody was there.

There was something breathing in my face. The smell was horrible, like rotting flesh.

"Dude, do you smell that?"

But Julio was way ahead of me and kept on walking, following the line out the door.

"Who's there?" I asked. I still heard the heavy breathing and then some words.

"Don't get on the bus."

It was an old woman's voice. I couldn't see her but she was right in front of me. Right there, breathing her foul breath into my face.

"Don't get on the bus, or you'll be in here with us!"

"What?" I said. "What are you talking about it?"

And suddenly that putrid smell disappeared. I ran, catching up to the rest of the line.

“That’s a good one, ” said Julio after I told him what had happened. We were sitting on a patch of grass outside eating our lunches. The sun felt good and I was glad to be out of that horrible warehouse. Had I imagined it all?

Afterwards, we visited the trophy room and then it was time to leave. I looked back at the tombstone warehouse and that’s when I saw her, standing in a window on the second floor and looking right at me. She was wearing a flowing blue dress, her head full of blackness, blackness where her eyes and mouth should have been. A bony finger waved back and forth.

“Don’t get on the bus, or you’ll be in here with us!” I heard screaming inside my head, over and over again.

I took off running. I heard Mrs. Jones yelling behind me, but it just made me run faster. I couldn’t help it. I ran and ran and ran as I thought about that rotting head full of black holes.

It was starting to get dark by the time I made it up to my front porch.

Mom met me at the door. I knew I’d be in trouble. But there was something more.

“Dave?” she said. She had been crying. Her face was red and swollen. Her eyes were tiny slits, pushed far back into her face.

“Sweetheart? Is that you?” She went up to me nervously and started poking me.

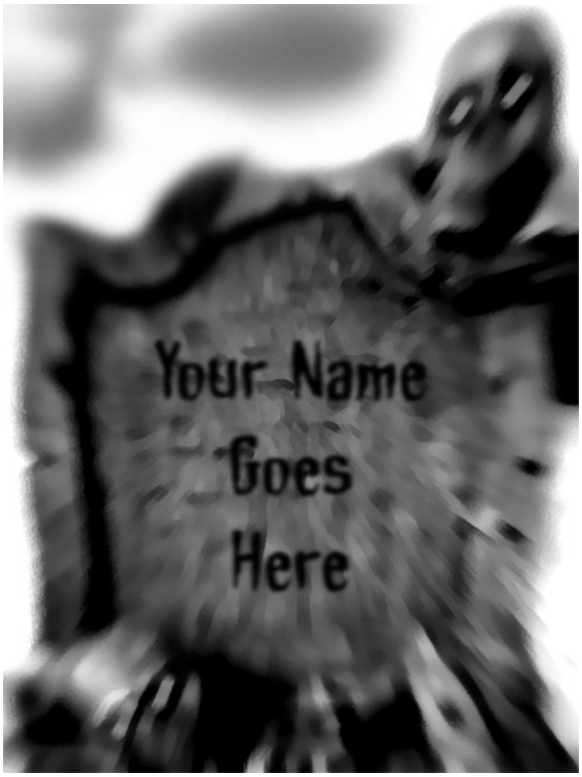
“Of course it’s me,” I said.

I was exhausted. I figured I had probably run at least 10 miles. I was hungry too.

Suddenly, she gave me a crazy hard hug, squeezing me tightly as she cried.

“We were sure you were in the river,” she said. “But you’ve been saved! You’ve been saved!”

The bus had never made it back from the tombstone factory. As it crossed the river, it skidded off the bridge and plunged into the water. There were no survivors.


Your Name
Goes
Here

La Arrugada

Oh, good you are awake, my friend. We were about to start without you. How are you feeling? What are you in here for? What is your name?

You are right, Miguel. My apologies. So many questions. Where are my manners? Dear me, I fear that was another question.

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Diego Cervantes. And that over there is Miguel Lavolpe. Miguel, as you can see, broke his leg. The doctor says he will be going home tomorrow. I am here because of, well, it is rather embarrassing. Diarrhea. I ate something that didn't agree with me three days ago and I haven't been able to stop going. I apologize in advance if I should wake you in the night with my noises.

In any case, Miguel and I like to tell stories to pass the time. Perhaps you would like to tell one of your own. Or simply listen.

I will go first.

This is the story of *La Arrugada*, The Wrinkled One.

No, Miguel, it is not about an old woman. Please, no more interruptions.

A very long time ago there was a young nurse who worked at this very hospital. Her name was Beatriz. She was a very good nurse, gentle and caring with her patients. She was the best nurse in the entire hospital. Beatriz did not perform miracles but her patients were the happiest patients in the hospital and many of them did get better, more so than the other nurses' patients.

The other nurses began to get jealous of this. And so they worked out an elaborate scheme to get even. They enlisted the assistance of a doctor at the hospital. He was very handsome.

The nurses started writing love letters to Beatriz from the doctor. With each letter, she became more and more intrigued and at some point fell in love with the doctor. She began writing back. Finally, the doctor asked Beatriz to meet him on the roof one night.

There was a beautiful full moon and it was warm.

¿*Qué*? Yes, Miguel, just like tonight. Now, please, let that be the last interruption.

"Oh, doctor," Beatriz said sweetly. "I love you too."

Suddenly all the nurses came out of the shadows and started laughing. The doctor laughed too.

"Did you enjoy our little joke?" they asked.

"Well, back to work everyone," the head nurse said.

After they all left, Beatriz walked over to the edge of the building. She stared at the street below. It was a long way down. She thought about jumping. She thought about it for a long time. Eventually, however, she stepped back from the abyss and returned to work.

But as the days went by, she became sadder and sadder. She lost interest in everything. Even in her patients. She began to show up to work late with a dirty, smelly, and very wrinkled uniform.

Beatriz was eventually fired. She never recovered from the cruel joke and died soon thereafter.

About a year later, rumors started spreading throughout the hospital that a ghost was roaming the halls late at night.

Some said it was Beatriz looking to take revenge on the other nurses. Others said she was looking for the doctor. Some said she looked and walked like a normal person, while others claimed she floated and glowed with a ghostly malice.

All the stories agreed, however, on two points. Beatriz was no longer gentle and caring. She had become evil, consumed with a burning hatred. And she still wore the terribly wrinkled uniform.

Sometimes an unfortunate patient would make the mistake of interrupting the ghost, this *fantasma*, from her mission. When someone would call out in the night for help, the ghost would sometimes appear. And she would be most displeased.

Patients suddenly started dying in the hospital. Not the ones in critical or grave condition either. The ones in good condition. Patients who had no business dying.

What's that? You are in pain? Oh, that is too bad. *Que lastima.* There is that switch by the side of the bed. Yes, that one. The nurse will soon come with your medication.

Allow me to return to our story. It will perhaps help take your mind off the pain.

Unfortunately, there is not much more to tell. It is just a story after all, but some of the more superstitious insist that the ghost of Beatriz is real and that she returns with the coming of the full moon.

Wait. What was that? Out in the hall. Did you hear it? Did you hear the words?

"Doctor, is it you? *Te quiero, mi amor*. I still love yooooooou…"

It must be her.

[Whisper] *Por el amor de Dios*, do not make a sound. God protect us. She is coming. Our only hope is to pretend we are asleep. It is she, *La Arrugada*. She has answered your call. The door is opening. Do you smell the filthy uniform? Oh, no. Do not look upon her face. It is twisted with hate. Oh, and the wrinkles. The horrible wrinkles.

Save yourselves. Save yoursel—

AAAH!

Mine Your Own Business

It had been two weeks since that day down in the mine. Two weeks since 17 men lost their lives. His men. His friends. His fault.

No one spoke to Gerry MacMurray at the funerals. The wicked glares of the widows and the orphans said it all. It was his fault. He was responsible.

It had happened near the end of their shift. Gerry was in charge and he was pushing the men hard, trying to impress the boss man. Everything was going fine. And then the support beams gave way and the ceiling and the rocks crashed down on them. Death swallowed them whole. They never had a chance.

Gerry was the only survivor of the disaster. He came out of it with hardly a scratch. It seemed like a miracle. But in Gerry's empty heart, it felt more like a curse.

He went back down in the mine, working alone. The other miners didn't seem to want him around. They didn't even look at him, let alone talk to him. And who could blame them? He was bad news.

He pounded away at the rock all day long, throwing his rage into every swing of his pick. After work—alone, ignored, and cast out—Gerry wandered the streets of the sad, little town.

"Why?" he whispered. "Why?"

Days and days passed like this and there came a point when he could hardly remember anything in the before time. Then one afternoon right around quitting time, Gerry passed by the abandoned tunnel where the accident had happened. He saw a lantern light coming toward him from out of the shaft.

"Gerry," a voice called out.

It was Owen, his best friend.

"Gerry, you've got to let it go," Owen said. "And you've got to move on, boyo."

Owen then walked back down the tunnel.

Gerry dropped to the ground and started crying. He cried for a long time. When he looked up, what he saw almost made him scream. There, standing over him, were all the men who had died in the accident. Their terrible faces seemed to look right through Gerry.

"You cannot stay here," Owen said again. "You have to come with us."

The ghosts had come back to take their revenge! Gerry got up and started running.

"You're not real!" he screamed. "Not real!"

When Gerry finally stopped running, Owen was standing right there in front of him.

"We all died in that accident back there," he said. "You too, boyo. You've been dead the whole time. Dead, dead, dead."

Gerry was about to run again, but then he looked down at his hands. They were cold and gray—the hands of a dead man. He suddenly understood. And he wasn't afraid anymore.

"It's time to accept it," Owen said, putting an arm around Gerry's shoulder. "It's time to go home."

The Elemental

Noah was so bored. So very, very bored.

He had been dragged around Ireland by his parents for a week now, and they acted like it was the most interesting place in the world. They'd listen to tour guides, who made no sense with their wild accents, and then they would say something like, "Well, isn't that fascinating!"

It all made Noah want to barf. This was not his idea of summer vacation fun.

But then, on the ninth day of the trip, his luck started changing.

They visited a place called Castle Leap that was supposed to be haunted. As they got off the tour bus, he looked up at the towering, decaying stone building, and couldn't wait to get inside.

Noah had always wanted to go somewhere haunted. He loved all those ghost hunting shows on TV, and even tried to be a ghost hunter himself once at an empty haunted house down the street. Now was his chance for a real live ghostly encounter. He was even carrying his dad's video camera.

It was easy to give his parents the slip once they got inside. The tour was packed with people, and the castle was huge. Noah followed a long stone corridor to a staircase that led upstairs. He started filming.

"Here we are at Leap Castle, where it is said that 500 years ago the prince of the castle killed his own brother to rise to power," Noah said. "Since then, the castle has become a hatching ground for disembodied voices and ghostly sightings."

Noah reached the top of the stairs and followed another empty hallway. He turned the camera on himself, looking into the lens.

"Now, I'm going to try to use provocation to get the spirits to respond," Noah said. "Are you the ghost of the prince who was murdered? Are you angry?"

He watched the hallway through the LCD screen. He heard nothing and saw nothing. Noah sighed. The problem was that it was broad daylight and he knew that no ghost in its right mind would show up. If only he could come back when it was dark. But his parents were leaving after the tour, and he would never get to see the castle at night.

But there had to be some areas that were completely dark—it was a castle after all. Noah stopped filming, and went searching.

After walking past several rooms and down more hallways, he found something. It was a small wooden door. He opened it and was pleased to see that inside was a very dark stairwell that led down. A metal chain was strung across the doorway with a sign that read "KEEP OUT: Staff Only."

This would be perfect.

Noah had never let signs stop him before. And as he knew from watching every episode of Ghost Adventures twice, Zak Bagans didn't let signs stop him either. He threw his legs over the metal chain and pulled the door over, leaving it open just a crack. Now it was pitch black, just like he needed. He turned on the camera.

"Are you the ghost of the dead brother? Are you looking for revenge?" Noah asked, slowly walking down the stairs. "Well, I'm right here for ya, if you're looking for someone to take your anger out on."

This was a strategy the TV ghost hunters used sometimes to get the ghost to appear. Getting them angry would help them manifest.

"Oh, my GOD, I just heard a noise!" Noah said into the camera. "Are you serious right now? Dude…"

He pointed the camera back up at the door.

"That was nuts. I can't bleepin' believe that just happened. There is definitely something in the room with me now," he said.

"I'm getting chills," he lied.

He turned the camera on his own face, dropping his mouth in shock. He was overacting, just like Zak.

"If you're looking for revenge, why don't you just go ahead and push me? Show me that you're here," he yelled.

There was only silence.

He slowly walked down the stairs as he filmed. He saw nothing, but suddenly he smelled something. It was horrible, like the smell of rotten eggs, or a massive loss of intestinal control.

"Whew, it's really beginning to stink in here, guys," Noah said. "Looks like the brother's lost control of his bowels in death."

Noah had almost made it to a landing when he heard a real noise behind him. He turned the camera back up at the door. Suddenly he heard the small door above slam shut. A real chill slid down his body.

"Do you have something you want to say to me?" he yelled, his voice cracking a little.

Just as he was talking into the camera, he glanced back up at the door and saw something move. He quickly aimed the camera up and in the screen, he saw a tall black, hooded figure towering at the top of the stairs. The smell of rotten eggs suddenly got stronger.

"Oh, my GOD!" Noah yelled, except this time there was real terror in his voice.

He ran down to the landing and was relieved to find another door. It was to another room. With the light from the camera, he could see that it had stone walls and floors. Chains were bolted to the walls.

There was something on the ground in the corner. Noah walked over and slowly realized what it was. Cameras! The remains of dozens and dozens of cameras, ripped to shreds!

"Oh, my—" Noah said, never finishing the last word. He tried to scream, but it was no use.

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Meanwhile, back on the tour, Noah's parents were enjoying the tour guide's candor about the spirits said to haunt Castle Leap. Of course, he said, the guidebooks wrote about the murdered prince who haunted the grounds. But there was something else that inhabited the castle: a malevolent entity that caused people to get hurt. It was said that the Elemental, as it was called, lived in a small dungeon at the bottom of the castle.

"Don't ya worry, folks, we never take groups down there," the tour guide said, laughing. "Besides, you'll know he's around. People say that whenever The Elemental is present, the room reeks of sulfur. Can't miss that!"

Aerial Burial

The trail seemed to go on forever.

"Dad, when are we going to be there?" Sally moaned.

"It has been a long day," her mom said, straining from the weight of her backpack.

"Any minute now, you two," Bill Burtleson answered.

The truth was they should have been at the lake by now. They had to be close he told himself.

It seemed like just a little while ago the sun was high in the sky, and even though the forest was dense with trees and brush, it had been bright compared to how it was now. Now, the light was quickly disappearing, and the forest had turned into dark gray twilight.

Soon it would be too dark to keep going, and they would have to give up trying to get to a good campsite along the secluded mountain lake described in the guidebook.

"Okay, here's what we're going to do," Bill said. "You two can leave your packs here and when we reach the lake, Bill Jr. and I will come back and get the packs while you set up the tent."

"Deal," Moira Burtleson said, dropping her pack in the middle of the trail. Sally dumped hers next to it.

That helped them go a little faster at first, but after half an hour they still hadn't reached the lake. Dark gray was quickly turning into sinister black.

"We're going to have to camp around here somewhere," Bill said, feeling foolish. "Let's find a flat spot for the tent."

They wandered off the trail for a few minutes.

"This doesn't look so bad here," Moira said. "We'll spruce it up and have dinner ready by the time you get back."

"All right, Bill Jr.," Bill said. "Let's go back for those packs."

"Dad, can I go instead?" Sally said.

"I thought you were tired," her dad said.

"I feel a lot better," she said.

"Okay, I don't think Bill Jr. will mind," her dad said.

"Suits me just fine," Bill Jr. said.

Bill pulled out the flashlights and handed them out. Then they headed off.

"It's kind of scary out here," Sally said after a while.

She's right, Bill thought.

He started talking to get their minds off the creepiness of the black forest.

"You know, I think there's an old Native American burial ground around here somewhere," he said at some point.

He began to regret having said it, but Sally didn't seem scared. In fact, she started asking about it.

Bill went on to explain how some tribes used to hang their dead up in the trees instead of burying them. Sometimes the bodies were placed on simple platforms. In some cases, a canoe might be built and stuck up in the trees with the corpse of a chief inside.

"That's pretty cool," Sally said.

It wasn't much longer before they found the backpacks and started heading back.

"Boy, I'm starving," Bill said. "How 'bout you?"

"Me too," Sally said.

After a while, she started thinking about the burial ground. She began to think about which way the dead bodies faced and how they looked. She wondered whether pieces of rotting flesh would tumble down from the trees when the corpses decomposed.

Soon Sally was too scared to look up at the trees. She kept her eyes glued to the small spot of ground illuminated by her flashlight.

"I think we've gone too far," her dad said. "I should have marked the spot where we left the trail."

"Not cool, Dad," Sally said. "Not cool."

They turned back down the trail.

“I hope they have a fire going,” Bill said. “It’ll make it easier to find them.”

They stumbled back up and down the trail several more times. At some point Sally thought she heard distant chanting and drumming coming through the trees.

“There!” her dad finally shouted.

Sally looked up and saw the beam of his flashlight bouncing against the walls of their bright yellow tent. They had made it!

“I guess they weren’t able to build a fire,” Bill sighed. “I’ll get one going in no time.”

Sally unzipped the tent and poked her head inside. There was no one there.

“Where’d they go?” she said.

“Maybe they’re digging a toilet pit,” Bill said.

A few drops of rain began to fall.

Odd, Bill thought. There hadn’t been a cloud in the sky earlier.

He began to look for the tent’s rain fly cover when he suddenly heard a bloodcurdling scream. He turned around to see Sally looking up into the sky, pointing her flashlight. There were wet, red streaks across her face.

Bill aimed his flashlight up to where she was looking. He could see something suspended in the treetops. It was—

AAAH!

Killed by Kooties

Morley Mortimer was the creepiest kid in school. His face was covered with hideous pimples that were constantly bubbling up and erupting like the mudpots of Yellowstone. His nose was always running like someone training for a marathon. And he was always drooling like a leaky toilet.

In short, Morley was a poster child for the kooties.

One day after school, the coolest kid in school, Roger Reeves, was practicing free throws in the gym.

"Those free throws aren't gonna make themselves," the coach had said. "You need to spend as much time practicing as you do standing in front of the mirror."

Yeah, yeah, yeah, Roger thought. And how does he know how much time I spend in front of the mirror?

After shooting his tenth brick in a row, he went over to take a drink from his water bottle.

Then he went back to the line and missed another shot. Badly.

That's when Morley walked in.

"Hey, Roger," he said, as spit flew out of his mouth. "You trying to make a basket or are you building a house?"

"Good one, More," Roger said. "What brings you here?"

"Oh, I forgot my water bottle," Morley said.

Roger watched Morley walk over and pick up his water bottle.

"Hey, that's mi—" Roger began to say and stopped. He remembered at that moment that he had forgotten his own water bottle back at his desk. And then the sick realization hit him like a ton of free throws that he had just taken a drink from that water bottle over there. Morley's water bottle!

"You okay, Roger?" Morley said as he wrapped his lips around the bottle's valve. "You look a little sick."

"Sick? Sick!" Roger's mind screamed. "I'm dying here!"

For the rest of the day, Roger did his best to think about something else. But he couldn't get his mind off it. Those lips touching his lips. That drool going in his mouth and down his throat. Those Morley germs coursing through his body. Those germs. Those Morley germs! Ah!

Roger didn't eat dinner that night and went to bed early.

He woke up at some point, needing to go to the bathroom. After he had finished he caught a glimpse of his face in the mirror.

No. It couldn't be. His face was covered with pimples. Snot was running down his nose in thick gobs. He was drooling. Just like Morley. Just like Morley.

The next morning his mom found Roger in bed, a look of complete horror on his face. He was dead.

The autopsy revealed that he had died of a heart attack.

"His heart was in perfect shape," the coroner said. "It's as if he died of a great and terrible fright."

The man at the funeral home was grateful for having so little work to do.

"Such a handsome young man," he told Roger's family. "Such a perfect face. I couldn't find a single mark on him. Not even as much as a pimple."

Wendigo Psychosis

It was a beautiful day. The snow that had been falling steadily for two weeks had finally stopped, making way for an icy blue sky. The mountains that surrounded the small Wyoming town looked bodacious.

Josh wished he could get up there. As he started driving toward his high school, he was thinking about cross-country skiing and decided to just turn around. With his skis already in the car, it was just a matter of navigating up the slick, winding roads.

He arrived at the trailhead and parked. It wasn't surprising to find that he was the only one there. He checked the backpack that was always stored in the Jeep and found plenty of water and snacks. His plan was to go out for just an hour or two, then maybe head back to catch his afternoon classes.

The trail wound through a dense forest of pine trees. Everything was plastered with thick white snow. He was happy to see that he was the first and only skier on the trail. He was making new tracks, which meant he wasn't going to be able to go very fast.

After about an hour, Josh stopped to take some pictures. He unzipped his backpack and looked around. That's when he noticed it. A little way down from where he stood were fresh footprints alongside his ski tracks, as if somebody were following him.

"This can't be," he said.

He hadn't seen anybody and there had been no other cars in the lot.

He took a few pictures and started up again.

In a little while he stopped and again found footprints behind him, right beside his tracks.

"What in the Devil is going on?" he whispered.

Nobody was around for miles. In fact, he hadn't seen another person, bird, or animal the entire morning.

He stared at them and to his horror, he actually saw footprints being formed right in front of his eyes, heading closer!

Josh started skiing harder, now sure that somebody or something was stalking him. He could almost feel eyes on his back, but he had no logical explanation for what it was.

When he stopped to catch his breath, he dreaded looking back. But he did. And again there were footprints, coming up the ridge toward him. A chill shot through his body.

Something was really there! Something he couldn't see.

"Who's there?" he shouted.

Only his echo answered back.

Josh ended up going much farther than he originally planned. He looked at his watch.

"I've got to turn around if I want to get back before dark," he said.

He took off. There was nothing to do but ski back toward whatever was headed his way.

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Jeremiah Smith was having a terrible month. The winter had been difficult, so very difficult. Recent storms had dumped at least two feet of snow, which made trapping and hunting down right impossible.

As he stepped out of his shelter, his stomach growled. He was starving and weak, but was happy to finally see a blue sky. He put on his buckskin coat and coonskin hat. Although it had stopped snowing, it was extremely cold.

His food supply was beyond running low—it was just plain out. He had finished off the leg a week ago. The leg he had cut off a dead Indian he had found.

At first the meat tasted odd but by the end, Jeremiah was sure he had never eaten anything as delicious.

Jeremiah stood by the fire, sipping the last of his coffee-flavored water. Just a hard winter, that's all. He had lived out here three years already. He would get through this. Things would turn around.

He loved the peace and serenity of the mountain man life. He recalled back to when he had first heard about men going off to the west, to live off the land and trap and hunt animals. It sounded like paradise. He had been a

soldier in the Mexican American War and had been forced to do many bad things. He wanted to spend the rest of his life forever away from other men and their politics. He was never going back.

He made sure he had all his gear for a day of hunting: his Hawken rifle, Bowie knife, and powder horn. Then he walked into the woods.

When he walked over a ridge, he hesitated. Up ahead was an Indian burial ground. He didn't like to cross over such things. Bad luck. But the way he saw it, he had to search everywhere for food, even there. Besides, he thought he had seen something moving in the trees.

Jeremiah crossed the burial site as fast as he could. He would just put it out of his mind and focus on the hunt. If he had to track the beast all day, he would. He would wait and make the one shot from his Hawken's count.

For a long while he followed his prey. It was leaving strange tracks in the snow. He couldn't make out what it was. It ran like an animal but left tracks like a sled. Could have been another mountain man or Indian. At this point, he didn't care.

The prey would dart ahead, but Jeremiah was always able to catch up. After a while, he felt good about his chances. He could smell the tender meat cooking over an open fire. It made his mouth water just thinking about it. He hoped the meat would taste as sweet as that leg had.

Jeremiah stopped and took careful aim. And then the strangest thing happened. Right on top of a small hill, the beast turned and headed right toward him.

He took aim. Finally, his luck was changing.

The Woman
in the Painting

The hotel room was small but had everything Jim Chin needed for the night: a bed, a desk, and a bathroom.

He opened his computer and checked email and the day's news. After a while, he looked up and studied the painting that hung over the desk. It was almost like a mirror, reflecting the room behind Jim. Everything was just as it was in the room. There was the desk and the bed and chair by the window. The only difference was that a woman was sitting in the chair. Jim could only see the back of her head. She had her gray hair up in a bun and a lavender-colored ribbon around her neck. Everything about the scene was from another time. A simpler, old-fashioned time.

It had been a long day. After flipping through the television channels several times, Jim began to get sleepy. He soon drifted off, the remote still in his hand. The bed was comfortable, and the hotel and street outside quiet. But Jim didn't sleep well. He tossed and turned and tossed and turned some more.

At one point during the night, the smell of perfume or flowers filled the room. Jim wasn't very good at identifying flowers but he thought they might be lilacs.

Jim sat up and looked around the room. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. But then as he looked at the painting, the woman in the chair suddenly turned toward him. There was no long black hooded robe, no scythe. In fact the old woman looked right at him and smiled in a kind, friendly way. Yet at that moment Jim knew as sure as he knew anything in this world, that this was the face of death.

And he knew that she was coming for him.

When the alarm clock went off in the morning, Jim still felt sleepy. But he was relieved that the nightmare had just been a dream. Nothing more.

He got up and packed his bag. The painting was just as he had first seen it. The woman was sitting with her back to Jim. He went downstairs and checked out of the hotel.

On her 12th floor balcony an ancient woman watered her garden. She smiled up at the sun. She had a ribbon around her neck. The old woman suddenly slipped on a wet tile and bumped into a large pot of flowers that was balanced on the railing. The pot of light purple flowers teetered for a moment and then fell over the side. Down, down, down it dropped toward the street below.

At that same moment Jim stepped out onto the sidewalk. A second later there was a skull-shattering crash and then screams from the people on the street.

Le Père Fouettard

"Wait for me, girl," the voice called out. "I won't hurt yooooooou…"

Abby ran as fast as she could down the dark cobblestone street, but the footsteps kept getting louder and closer.

"Wait for me, girl," the voice said again. "I won't hurt yooooooou…"

Abby's heart pounded away like a mechanical monkey beating his drum.

She looked over her shoulder but still couldn't see the figure's face.

"Wait for me, girl. I won't hurt yooooooou…"

"No!" she screamed. "Nooo!"

And then she woke up.

This same dream had haunted her sleep for the last six nights. The only difference was that each time the shadow figure got closer. She had a feeling of dreadful certainty that when the thing caught up to her, she would die in the dream—and in real life.

"You look terrible," her mom said the next morning. "Another nightmare? Maybe you can take a nap when you get home from school."

That's right, Abby thought. We have show-and-tell in French class today.

Abby finished her orange juice and went back to her room.

She reached up on the highest shelf and brought down the odd Santa Claus doll her dad had recently brought back from France for her.

Abby had stopped believing in old St. Nick a few years ago, but she still loved to collect the dolls.

This doll was dressed all in black with a black beard to boot. Even its eyes were completely black with no whites showing. Its expression was also dark and angry. He carried a stick and an empty sack.

Abby thought the doll was rather strange looking, but that wasn't all that unusual. Each doll was just the artist's interpretation. No two were alike. Most were jolly. But some looked a little scary.

When it was her turn, Abby walked up to the front of the class with the doll.

"*Bonjour*," she said. "*Voici mon poupée de Père Noel*."

The teacher smiled and interrupted.

"That is not Santa Claus," she said in English with a heavy French accent. "That is Père Fouettard."

Abby looked confused.

"Take a seat, *mon cher*," the teacher said. "I can explain it to you after class."

Later the teacher told her all about Père Fouettard. It turned out that he was Santa Claus' assistant. His job was to punish the bad kids with his stick.

"The story has been cleaned up and made politically correct throughout the years," the teacher said. "But it began as a typically grisly fairy tale.

"Some of the earliest accounts state that Père Fouettard was a butcher who chopped up three young boys for their money and used the meat in a stew. When Père Noel, to you Santa Claus, heard about this he brought the boys back to life and made Père Fouettard into his assistant."

"That's a pretty weird story," Abby said. "I mean, *ce très bizarre*."

On her way home it struck her that she had started having the nightmare right about the time her dad had given her the doll. She decided to put it somewhere else in the house.

She didn't want to hurt her father's feelings, so she had to think of an appropriate place for Père Fouettard. But for now he would go in the back of the coat closet by the front door.

That night, Abby looked up at her collection.

"Good night, Santas," she said, turning off the light.

She soon fell into a deep sleep.

And then the dream came back. Abby was being chased again.

"Wait for me, girl," a voice called out behind her. "I won't hurt yooooooou…"

The dark figure was close now, closer than he had ever been. The footsteps were right behind her.

Abby felt a pain in her ankle.

A moment later she woke up screaming. Her dad rushed into the room.
“That was a bad one, huh?” he said.
“It was so real,” Abby sighed. “My leg still hurts.”
She pulled the covers off and saw several red welts around her ankle.
“How can that be?” Abby screamed.
Hiding under the foot of the bed, the doll smiled.
“I won’t hurt you, girl,” he whispered in a French accent. “Next time I’ll just kill you.”
AAAH!

Blood Test

Nathan was always getting into accidents. Broken bones, chipped teeth, and sprained ankles were everyday events. So when he woke up in a hospital room in pain, he wasn't all that surprised.

He looked up at the ceiling, trying to piece together what had happened. It had been a crisp autumn morning. He remembered the crunch of the leaves beneath his rubber bicycle wheels as he hurried to class. The street was just coming up where he would cross and…

It had all happened so suddenly. Then he felt his body land with a thud on the pavement, followed by sharp jolts of pain. And then just blackness.

"He's awake," a loud, unfamiliar voice boomed.

"Oh, Nathan!" his mom said, now leaning over him. "We were so worried about you."

"You had quite the close call there, son," his dad said. "But don't worry, you're gonna be just fine. Isn't that right, doc?"

"Oh, yes," the unfamiliar voice said. "With several weeks of proper rest, he should be able to go back to the playground with the other little school children."

"Thank you so much, Dr. Sconosciuto," his mother said.

Nathan painfully turned his head to look at the doctor for the first time. He had black eyes and a thick beard that engulfed his face and he was smiling. A smile that made Nathan's skin crawl, though he didn't know why. The doctor then disappeared out the door and down the hall.

"How long do I have to be here for?" Nathan asked, groggily. "I want to go home."

"The doctor said it's going to be a few days, maybe a week," his mother said, holding the hand of his non-broken arm. "But don't worry, Nathan. You'll be home before you know it."

The days passed by slowly in the bleak hospital room. Even the slightest movement caused intense discomfort. Nathan wished he could just go home and play God of War on his PlayStation.

But the boredom and the pain were minor compared to the creepiness of Dr. Sconosciuto. There was just something about him that made Nathan feel like running down the hall screaming in his hospital gown, broken arm and all. One night Nathan woke up to find Dr. Sconosciuto hovering over the bed, looking down at him with those dark, dark eyes.

Nurse Allerton had told him that Dr. Sconosciuto was one of the best doctors at the hospital. She had also said she would trust him with her life. But looking up into those freaky eyes that night, Nathan didn't feel quite so confident about putting his own life in the doctor's hands.

Nathan felt weak. He heard the nurse tell his parents that he had low-blood pressure, but that it was normal given his condition. He drifted in and out of sleep and had strange dreams.

At some point a large crash from somewhere out in the hall jarred him awake. He glanced over at the clock. It was almost two in the morning. The rain was hammering on the window outside. Maybe someone had just dropped a tray of food or something, but Nathan had a bad feeling about the sound. He rubbed his eyes and threw his legs over the side of the bed.

The tile floor was cold and clammy against his bare feet. The hall was completely empty and dead quiet. It hurt to walk, but he slowly dragged himself down the silent hall. There was a desk where a night nurse should have been, but nobody was there. He made it to a room farther down the hall where he thought the sound might have come from. The door was wide open.

Nathan felt his skin crawl and knew who was there before he even saw the silhouette. It was Dr. Sconosciuto, with his back to the door, standing over a patient. Nathan couldn't tell what he was doing. He thought he heard a terrible slurping sound. He began to slowly back away from the room.

"What are you doing out of bed, Nathan?" Nurse Allerton said, coming from behind him. Just at that moment, Dr. Sconosciuto came out of the room. Nathan couldn't find his voice to scream. He could only keep backing up—running right into Nurse Allerton.

Nathan grabbed her arm tightly with his good hand.

"Do you see what he did?" he asked, his voice frantic and cracking. Dr. Sconosciuto walked up to the two of them.

“Nurse, what is this young man doing out of bed?” he said as he continued writing on a chart. He rubbed his eyes.

“I was away from my desk. I’ll escort him back to his room.”

“I’m beat. That was my last patient and now I get to go home. It’s been a long night,” the doctor said, handing her the chart. “Have a good night, nurse. And Nathan, get some rest.”

“Good night, Dr. Sconosciuto,” Nurse Allerton said.

Relief flooded Nathan’s body. Dr. Sconosciuto was perfectly normal. Just attending to patients, that’s all. What had he been thinking? The bike accident must have done something to his brain.

“Sorry to have been a problem,” Nathan said.

Nurse Allerton just smiled. And to Nathan’s horror, he saw her fangs hanging over her lower lip, stained in red.

Nathan never got better.

Piano Lesson

No one knew exactly how old Mrs. Maugham was, but she had to be close to a hundred. She loved her piano and her garden. Early each morning she worked in the garden and then opened all the curtains and played the piano. She played so beautifully that even people who didn't like classical music would stop in front of the house to listen.

It seemed that things would always be this way, but then one day the man who owned the house sold it. Mrs. Maugham hoped she could continue to keep renting from the new owner.

"Oh, dear," the old woman said when the new owner, a man named Wilson, told her he intended to live there himself. "Oh, dear."

He gave her one month to move out.

"Oh, dear," was all Mrs. Maugham could say. "Oh, dear."

Soon after that, Mrs. Maugham stopped working in her garden. Then she stopped playing her piano. Then she died.

Wilson threw out all her things except for the piano, and moved into the house.

The first night in the house, Wilson woke up during the night and heard the piano. When he got up, the music stopped. He walked downstairs and saw that all the curtains facing the dead garden had been opened.

This went on every night for more than a week until Wilson finally had the piano taken away.

This only made things worse. Now the music played all night. Other than the open curtains, everything else seemed normal. There was no piano. And yet the piano kept playing.

Not having slept for days, Wilson began losing his mind.

Late one night, a neighbor called the police. The officers found Wilson out in the middle of the street.

"Can't you hear it?" he kept screaming. "Can't you hear it?"

"He says he hears a piano playing," one of the neighbors said. "I don't know what he's talking about."

The officers took Wilson inside.

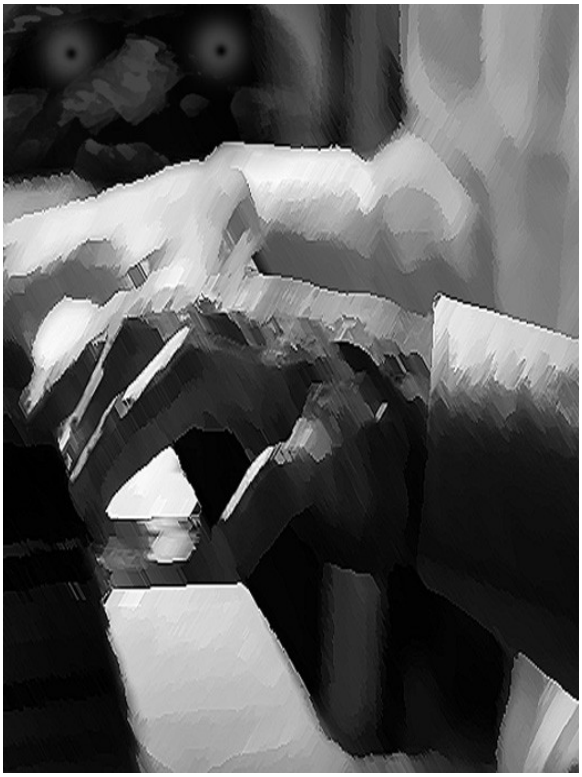
"There," Wilson said, his crazed eyes dancing around the living room. "Don't you hear it?"

The officers both shook their heads.

"Best get some sleep, Mr. Wilson," one of them said. "And don't make us come back out here.

The police drove away and inside the house Wilson cried, "Don't you hear it? Don't you hear it? Don't you hear it…"

A few days later the house mysteriously burned down to the ground. The firefighters arrived at the scene too late to save him, but they said that after Wilson's screams finally died down, a piano could be heard playing.



That Day in Dallas

Dan was driving through Dallas, Texas. He had just finished a week of very successful business meetings and was now on his way to the airport. He smiled as he looked out on the crowded freeway.

"I tell you what," Dan said in a bad Texas accent. "How 'bout them Cowboys."

"In point two miles keep left," the GPS voice said. "Keep left."

"Now you tell me," Dan sighed.

He looked over his shoulder and then in his rearview mirror. There were too many cars and there was no way he was going to make it—not with the way these people drove.

"Stay left," the GPS kept repeating as Dan failed to follow the last-minute directions. "Stay left. Recalculating. Recalculating."

Dan got off at the next exit.

"Let's try that again, shall we, sweetheart?" he said to the device.

He drove through a dark underpass and came out on to a park surrounded by tall buildings and blue skies.

"This looks so familiar," Dan said out loud. "It's almost like I've been here before."

At each intersection the computerized female voice told him to turn right. He was soon back in the same place.

"C'mon now, little lady," Dan said to the GPS. "I don't want to miss my plane."

After making yet another right turn, Dan looked out at the grass and was struck by a feeling of terrible dread and heartbreaking sorrow. The emotions were so strong, he suddenly felt like crying.

A few minutes later, he was back at the green downtown park. He pulled over and stopped the car.

"Recalculating," the GPS said. "Recalculating."

"You better recalculate!" Dan said, getting angry.

"Continue nineteen point six three miles," the voice said.

"Ah, for the love of Tony Romo!" Dan said as he brought down his fist on the dashboard.

Suddenly sparks flew from the GPS. Dan felt a strong electrical current pass through him and had to close his eyes as a bright light engulfed the car.

"Save him," the GPS said in a shrill voice. "Save him."

"Forget this," Dan sighed, turning off the navigation system. "I'll just get to the airport the old fashioned way: I'll ask directions."

Dan got out of the car and noticed that everyone was dressed strangely, as if they had just left the set of Mad Men, that TV show set in the early 1960s.

"Save him," the GPS somehow kept repeating behind him. "Save him."

People were lining the sidewalk. The cars were all old. Police officers were blocking off the streets.

Maybe they're having some sort of old timer's parade, Dan thought.

"Excuse me, can you tell me how to—" Dan said to a man walking by. "Wait, what's going on here?"

"President Kennedy is coming through here in a few minutes," the man said. "Better get your place."

"President Ke—don't you mean Pre—" Dan asked. "Hey, what year is this?"

Dan knew it was a foolish question. It was a foolish question because somehow he already knew the answer, even before the man answered.

"Have you hit your head, boy?" the man said, shaking his. "What year is this! Why, it's a little somethin' that 'round these parts we like to call 1963."

"Nineteen sixty-three," Dan repeated slowly as the man walked away. "Of course, that's the grassy knoll right there. This is Dealey Plaza. I've seen it so many times on TV."

The crowd in the distance started cheering.

"This is crazy," Dan mumbled.

He looked up and saw the presidential motorcade come into view. He saw the First Lady dressed in pink. The old grainy films began to replay in his head. Dan knew that in minutes, maybe seconds, that pink suit would be covered in bone, blood, and brains.

"Maybe there's still time," Dan said and started running.

He began waving his arms in the air.

"No! Stop! Go the other way! Turn around! Turn around! Stop! Stop!"

It was no use. The limousine just kept coming down the street toward him. The President was waving to the crowd.

"No!" Dan screamed as he looked up at a shiny reflection coming from an open window in an old brick building. "Noooooo!"

A moment later he heard a shot. And then another.

Dan dropped to his knees.

"Noooooo!"

Horse of Horrors

Isaac stumbled across the gray horse while out hunting on the plains one day. It was a rare sight, a horse all alone, grazing in the tall golden stalks of grass. Isaac searched high and low for the owner, because a horse thief Isaac wasn't. But after not seeing anyone for miles in all directions, Isaac came to the conclusion that the horse was without an owner.

"This here is quite a find," Isaac said, petting the horse. "You sure lucky I came this way before the Injuns could get a hold of ya."

It looked as though the owner had suddenly abandoned the horse—saddle and all. Carved on one of the saddle's leather straps was the name "Sanders."

Isaac thought about waiting a little while to see if Mr. Sanders would return, but the sun was starting to sink low, and Isaac didn't feel like waiting around for a man who had most likely been killed by Indians. He decided to ride the horse back to his encampment.

"Giddy up, boy," Isaac said.

The horse broke into a pleasant gallop, cutting through the grass.

Isaac already had a horse back at camp, but had left it there so as not to scare away the game. As he rode the horse, Isaac gave some thought to the matter. At first, he thought he might sell him. He would fetch a good price. But the longer Issac sat in the saddle, the more he wanted to keep the well-trained horse.

They made it to the Flathead River before long, where they would have to cross to make it to camp.

The horse responded to Isaac's commands and started walking down the bank into the rushing water.

Isaac suddenly thought he heard something from the bushes behind him through the roar of the water. He turned around, but saw nothing.

When he looked ahead, Isaac saw a man standing underneath one of the cottonwood trees across the river. He sighed. This must be the horse's owner. His good fortune had run out. He hoped the owner would understand the situation, and not take him for a horse thief.

As Isaac and the horse got closer, he could see the man better. He was most peculiar indeed. Dressed in an old wrinkled army uniform, the young man looked to be injured in some horrid manner. Dried blood stained the left side of his face, and his skin was a sickly shade of purple. He looked to be suffering from a severe infection.

Maybe the man wasn't the horse's owner at all. Maybe he just needed help, Isaac thought.

"You all right there, sonny?" Isaac yelled out over the rushing water. The man didn't respond.

Then, all of a sudden, the horse started rearing up and whinnying, spooked by the man on the bank.

"Easy there, boy!" Isaac yelled, but the animal couldn't be reasoned with. The horse bucked and sent Isaac flying into the river, where he landed headfirst into a pile of sharp rocks.

The last thing Isaac saw was the solider standing underneath the cottonwood, his expression unchanged, like nothing had happened.

***

Myles Sanders got the beast at the army fort for a steal. The old man selling him told Myles that the horse had been through many battles in the civil war, and even a few against the Indians. The horse had been retired from duty and was now being sold by the fort.

"I implore you, Mr. Sanders, be careful with this here horse," the old man said.

"Why? Is he violent?" Myles asked.

"No, but he ain't like other horses," the old man said. "He's got quite a history, and sometimes that history follows him around. You understand what I'm saying?"

Myles didn't know what the old man was talking about. All he knew was that a noble horse like this usually went for twice the price he was paying for it.

"Sure, sure," Myles said. Myles mounted the horse and nodded to the old man before trotting out of the fort and into the vast expanse of the plains.

The old man shook his head. He really shouldn't have sold the horse, given its history. The horse's original owner was a soldier in the Union Army who was killed while riding the stallion into battle. The soldier was struck by a bullet in his left temple and died instantly.

Since then, the horse had had multiple owners. And every last one of them had died in bizarre accidents while in the saddle.

The old man couldn't help feeling guilty watching Sanders ride off onto the plains.

Maybe things will change, the old man thought. Maybe this one will be different.

But something in his gut told him the haunted horse would kill again.

El Cucuy
de la Montaña

"I would not go that way if I were you," Victor said.

"This is the way, Vicky. I told you, I've been here before," Angel said, looking past the snow at the trail on the other side.

Stalling, Victor drank slowly from his water bottle. It was dusty and hot, even for July, on the steep path that led to the summit of Mt. Demonico. But it was not quite hot enough to melt this patch of snow.

Veronica, Victor's sister, had driven them to the trailhead and would pick them up after her shift ended.

"I'll see you two little twerps later," she said. "Don't let *El Cucuy de la Montaña* get you—and don't be late."

"Your sister is fine," Angel said after Veronica drove away, playing with his make-believe TV Zorro mustache. "But I don't care for her calling me no twerp and treating us like we was children with that trash talk about some Boogie Man of the Mountain. *Por favor*."

Victor smiled. He knew a lot of people believed those stories about *El Cucuy de la Montaña*. And he knew Angel wasn't one of those people.

"Man, it drops a long way if we slip," Victor said now, looking at the rocky precipice. It was hundreds of feet down, maybe even a thousand. "The scavengers are gonna have one sweet dead man's party on what's left of us."

"You always show up with that fear of yours. Everywhere we go," Angel said. "C'mon now, girl, this is the way."

Victor tried to stretch out the break by talking.

"You know my uncle said he saw *El Cucuy de la Montaña* up here once when he was a kid," Victor said. "He said it looked just like a regular man but then it started to breathe out fog or something."

"Or something is right," Angel said. "Your uncle's been breathing in too much loco weed.

"All right. Time to do this."

Victor's stomach sank, the chocolate and peanuts mixing with the now fear-flavored nougat.

The boys walked up to the edge of the snow again.

Suddenly someone walked up behind them.

"Man, don't sneak up like that," Angel said, losing his balance a little.

The tall man had long hair and a beard and carried a walking stick. It was the kind that always made the boys laugh, selling for 50 bucks in town when you could find plenty of sticks in the woods for free.

"There's a better way up over here," he said.

Then he smiled, turned around, and walked away. Squinting in the fierce sun, Angel and Victor watched him leave.

"These *menso* tourists," Angel said.

"Look," Victor said, seeing his chance. "I'm gonna go check it out. I'll call out if I find it."

Angel looked down at the snow and the drop without saying anything. He shook his head as Victor headed off in the direction of the hiker.

"Yeah, okay," he said. "Might as well check it out, if it's faster and all."

Victor exhaled deeply as he heard Angel walking behind him.

The boys followed the man at a distance to where the trail veered upwards. They both realized instantly that here was the real trail.

"Hey, don't you think it's strange that he wasn't carrying a pack or anything like that?" Angel said.

"Yeah, not even water," Victor said. "Man, I'd be thirsty."

"Maybe his people are at the top and they have his stuff."

The stranger was already far ahead of them. Right before he disappeared from view, Victor thought he could see the man's breath.

Must be cold up there, he thought.

The rest of the hike was easy. Soon the two boys threw up their arms on the summit in celebration as if they had conquered Everest.

"Wow, this is awesome!" Victor said.

Angel agreed, meeting his friend's fist with his own.

They stood there for a few moments, taking in the top-of-the-world feeling and all the sights. What they didn't see was the stranger. Somehow he wasn't at the top.

"Weird, man," Victor said. "Where would he go? It's like he just vanished."

"Yeah," Angel said. "Weirder than your mom's tamales."

Victor was about to start laughing. But then he saw the stranger suddenly appear behind Angel. The man's eyes burned red through the frosty fog that escaped from his mouth.

Before Victor could warn his friend, the man picked Angel by the shoulders and threw him off the side of the mountain.

"¡Esta es mi montaña!" the man said. "This is my mountain, fools!"

As it came toward Victor, *El Cucuy*—or whatever it was—seemed to create its own weather. The sun disappeared and the temperature dropped like one of those rocks trailing behind poor Angel.

Victor started running down the path as fast as he could.

It felt more and more like November with every freezing step he took. The rocks under his feet were beginning to feel slippery, but he knew he couldn't afford to slow down. That thing was probably coming after him.

As he rounded a switchback, Victor saw the creature out of the corner of his eye. It was covered in snow and ice. Victor screamed.

"*Dios, por favor*," he said. "Help me."

A moment later he lost his balance and fell, hitting his head on a rock. Everything went black.

When Victor came to, it was dark. The sun had gone down and it was freezing. Angel was lying next to him.

"Angel?" Victor whispered, shaking his friend. "Angel."

Angel was cold and stiff.

He must be dead, Victor thought.

An otherworldly cold closed in all around. Suddenly, it was the dead of winter. Victor began to shake uncontrollably. When he looked down, he saw that he was completely encased in ice. He struggled to move, but all he could do was shiver.

Before his eyeballs froze over, Victor saw *El Cucuy de la Montaña* coming toward him.

"I will feed on him first," it growled, staring at Angel with those demon-red eyes. "And then I will come for you, *menso*. And then I will come for you…"

AAAH!

Pond People

On humid hot days, when the puddles of sweat would pool up on his upper lip and run down in streams on the sides of his face, Peyton and his friends Wendell and Morgan would go to Drawdy Pond and cool off. The pond was about half an hour's walk from their neighborhood, and being that they didn't have cars, it was one of the few places they could go without having to ask their parents for a ride.

"Sho is a hot one," Peyton would say.

"Sho is," Wendell would say.

"Dern right," Morgan would say.

The pond wasn't that big, but what it lacked in width, it made up for in depth. The pond was so deep, in fact, that people said you could easily hide a body down there, and it wouldn't ever see the light of day. People said this had happened, back when a serial killer named Smiling Jack came through the town a few decades earlier. They said he killed people and hid the dismembered body parts at the bottom of the pond, wrapping them in plastic bags weighed down with bricks to keep them from floating to the top.

Sometimes, kids would say that you could feel the fingertips of the murdered victims tickling your feet while you were swimming.

This was probably one of the reasons why nobody else was ever at Drawdy Pond. Or, maybe it was the fact that a power plant was not too far away. A lot of people thought the place was polluted.

But Peyton, Wendell, and Morgan didn't believe any of those stories about the murder victims or the pollution. All they knew was that the pond was a sweet place to spend the long, hot summer.

One afternoon Wendell was swimming at the far end.

"Ah, Smiling Jack's got me!" he yelled as the other two boys laughed. "He's grabbing my feet!"

The sun was going down, and it was just about time to get back home.

"Time for supper," Morgan said, getting out and pulling his shoes on at the pond's bank.

"I'm downright starved," Peyton said, swimming toward the shore. "And it's getting dark."

Wendell wasn't too far behind.

"Ah! Smiling Jack has my foot!" Wendell yelled again. "I just felt him brush against my leg!"

Peyton laughed again, but was beginning to tire of Wendell's jokes. Peyton just kept swimming and was soon close to the bank.

"C'mon, Wendell," Morgan shouted. "Let's go!"

But there was no answer, just a lot of splashing, and neither of the boys could see Wendell in the water.

"Wendell, where are you?" Peyton yelled.

Again, there was no answer. Peyton changed direction and started swimming back toward where Wendell had been. Maybe he had gotten entangled in some pond weeds.

"He's pullin' our leg again," Morgan said from the bank. "I'm dern sick of his shenanigans. I'm goin' home."

Morgan started down the trail, but before he could get even a few feet, he heard Peyton scream. A bloodcurdling, high-pitched wail.

"Oh, my God! It's Wendell's leg! It's Wendell's leg floating here next to me! Smilin' Jack got a hold of Wendell!" Peyton screamed, swimming like a madman for shore. "Morgan, help mmm—"

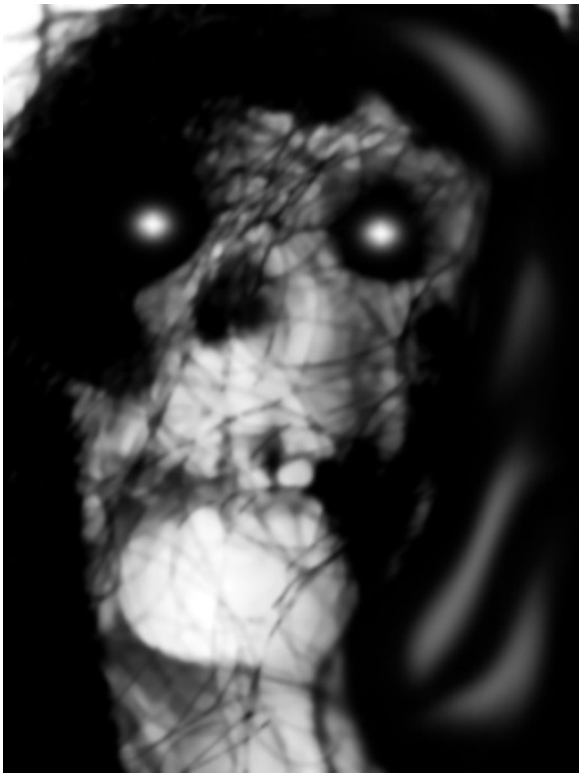
There were stifled gurgling sounds and a splashing of water. Morgan couldn't see anything in the darkness. He called out to Peyton and Wendell from shore, but nobody answered. Morgan could hear a lot of movement in the water.

Morgan ran all the way home.

***

Peyton, Wendell, and Morgan didn't know that just a few weeks earlier, the power plant had started preparations to build a new facility and had temporarily redirected a nearby stream into Drawdy Pond.

The particular stream was a favorite hangout for alligators.



Zombies are Us

George sat on the curb next to his friend Mike.

"Man, this town sure has changed," he said, shaking his head and rubbing his scruffy chin. "You just didn't use to see things like that."

They watched a zombie walk by on the other side of the street. His clothes were torn and his face had a lot of black rot on it. He had the usual slow, zombie limp that went with the usual slow, zombie mind.

"Yeah," Mike said, spitting into the street over his knees. "The town just ain't no good anymore."

"Remember all those pretty girls we'd chase on the weekends?" George said, smiling.

"Oh, boy, do I," Mike said. "And remember those chocolate ice cream sundaes that Donavan's used to make up?"

"Man. Those were good days," George said. "This here used to be a good town."

Suddenly the zombie caught the two friends in his vision and started heading over, in that usual slow-witted zombie kind of way.

"Ah, shoot," George said, getting up and clapping his hands together to get the sidewalk dust off. "I guess we're in for a fight. Ready?"

"Oh, I guess so," Mike said, yawning. He stood up and stretched. "Let's do it."

The fight lasted two minutes. The zombie didn't have a chance and lay dead, again, in the street.

"These zombies are such losers," Mike said, cracking his knuckles. "I mean, c'mon. This isn't even fun anymore."

George shook his head.

"I agree, pardner."

The two friends walked down the street as the sun fell out of the sky.

"How many of those zombies do you think we've killed since they invaded our town?" Mike asked.

"I dunno," George said. "At least a few thousand I'd say."

"That's 'cause they keep coming back to life. And it doesn't matter if we shoot 'em in the head or take them down with our fists. They always come back. We've probably killed the same ten zombies over and over and over again."

They walked some more.

"Yeah, it'd be good if we came up with a solution to kill them once and for all."

The two men got their minds thinking and then got to work. There was an old medical lab at the edge of town that nobody used anymore. It had all sorts of ancient equipment, books, and potions.

"When was the last time someone was in here?" Mike said.

"I dunno," George said. "But it's all ours. Now all we gotta do is try and figure out a cure for those monsters."

They worked day and night and day and night, reading the books and mixing chemicals. Finally, they were sure they had their antidote.

They went back out into town and killed another zombie and dragged it into the lab. They chained it up to a contraption that looked perfect for such things.

"This oughta do it," Mike said, holding up the beaker.

A crimson liquid swished around in the glass.

"Yep," George said. "I think we did it. Now we just gotta wait for Zomboman here to come back to life so he can take a nice, long drink."

"Yep," said Mike. "Might as well make ourselves comfortable."

They went to the corner and sat in old, large cushioned chairs.

"Man, if we aren't spending our days killing zombies, what will we do?" George said.

They thought for a moment.

"Hmm, didn't think about that," Mike said. "Come to think of it, this town was long dead before these zombies got here."

George sighed.

"Yep. Remember when the movie houses closed up on account of the economy? That kinda sucked."

"Yep. And remember when we lost our jobs?"

"Yep. And remember when the guy came and took my car because I had no money for the car payment?"

The two men got quiet. Then George came up with a new plan.

"I'm pretty sure that this here potion we created will be good for a little while," he said.

"Yep," Mike agreed. "Maybe we should cure the zombies another day."

"What about our friend there?" George asked, looking back. The zombie was still out of it, but his arms had started twitching.

"Best release him. He's part of our town now."

They unchained him, but the zombie was still mostly dead.

"Guess we'll see him out there," Mike said.

"Guess so," George said.

The two friends headed back outside.

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Chapter 1

Hunter woke up in a cold sweat. His heart was pounding in his ears.

He sat up in bed, turned the lamp on, and tried to catch his breath. He glanced at the alarm clock. It read *3:03*.

The nightmare again. The same nightmare that had haunted him since he was seven years old. Ever since that time he fell into an old well and was stuck down there for hours before they could reach him.

He grabbed the glass of water on the nightstand.

He tried to think about happy things: the new *Gears of War* PlayStation game that was coming out next week; his brand new digital video camera; and tomorrow's trip to the silver mine.

But no matter what Hunter tried to think about, his thoughts came back to the nightmare.

The dream always started the same. He was back down in the well. Half submerged in the putrid water. In the dark. Alone. His brother had gone to get help and Hunter was alone down there.

He closed his eyes and plugged his nose, trying to hold on until his brother got back. He felt along the walls, looking for something to hold on to. His feet didn't touch the bottom of the well and he had to keep dog paddling, flailing desperately to stay afloat.

But there was nothing along the wall to grab hold. Just a smooth, slimy surface. No way to climb out. He was stuck down there. Stuck. Would always be stuck. Would never get out of there. Trapped forever, dead in this prison of dead water.

After what felt like an eternity, he heard his brother's voice.

"Hunter!" Austin yelled. "You still down there?"

Hunter could make out the silhouette of his head and shoulders high above. Austin had a flashlight and was pointing it down at the water.

"Yeah!" Hunter said.

For the first time since he fell in, he felt hopeful. He was gonna get out of there. He was gonna make it. He was gonna live.

"The rescue crew is on its wa—"

Austin's voice fell silent.

"You still up there, Austin?"

There was no answer.

"Austin?"

Suddenly Austin started screaming.

"Oh, my God! What is that? There's something down there with you. No. Nooo!"

And then Hunter felt something. Something strong reaching out from under the water, wrapping tightly around his leg.

He let out a bloodcurdling scream and began thrashing and kicking wildly around in the water. But it was no use.

His frantic screams soon became gurgles as the thing yanked him under. Pulled him down, down, down under the water. Down all the way to the bottom of the well. And then beyond the bottom of the well. It was hot down there. Too hot to live. And yet he was surrounded by them. No end of evil things.

Hunter shuddered. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get back to sleep that night. Not even with the lights on.

Chapter 2

Hunter Saracen had been interested in the paranormal ever since. Nothing had actually grabbed him or pulled him under the water that day, but he was convinced he wasn't alone down there in that well.

When the firefighters finally came and pulled him out, he couldn't stop shaking. Everyone thought it was the cold or that he had gone into shock. But it was the thought of what might have been down there with him that haunted Hunter.

It still haunted him all these years later.

Hunter lived in a town called Tule Creek just outside of Las Vegas in the arid and vast Nevada desert. He lived in a small house with his mom and Austin.

Hunter's best friend was Blake Griswold. They had been tight ever since first grade, when Hunter and Blake were on the same little league baseball team. They both sat on the bench most of the season. Other kids called them nerds, dorks, geeks, or dweebs. And those were the nice ones.

In reality, Blake was the actual geek. Hunter was more of a tweener. Closer to a geek than to a jock like his brother, but definitely not full-blown dweeb material.

In any case, they were cool with the insults most of the time. They didn't need to pretend they were something they weren't. They felt at home with the things they liked. And they liked the same stuff. Video games. The original *Star Trek* series. Reality TV shows—the dumber the better. And the paranormal.

Blake was almost as obsessed with the paranormal as Hunter. Blake's mother had told him a story once about the grandfather he never knew.

He had died in a car accident when Blake's mom was just a teenager. The night of the accident his mom was doing homework, when she suddenly saw him in the living room in front of her. He was standing there, smiling. And then he was gone.

Half an hour later, a police officer came to the door and told her that her father had died in a car wreck.

Ever since Blake heard that story, he was hooked on anything and everything having to do with ghosts.

The two boys talked for hours on end about the paranormal. About what a ghost would really look like. Whether they appeared as white sheets or as a mist in the form of a person. About what made ghosts. Unfinished business? Revenge? A violent death?

More than anything, Hunter and Blake wanted to be ghost hunters. They felt like they had seen enough reality TV shows on the subject to make them experts. Hunter often wondered if it was his destiny that his parents had named him Hunter, as in ghost *hunter*.

Sometimes he would borrow his mom's ancient, heavy video camera and they would go to places around town that were supposedly haunted. The basement of the library which used to be the old courthouse in the days of the Wild West. A barn on the outskirts of town where people said the ghost of Barnaby Hoyt still "lived" after a horse killed him by kicking him in the head more than 100 years ago. The middle school track, rumored to have been built atop an ancient Indian burial ground.

But in all of their explorations, Hunter and Blake never found any serious evidence of paranormal activity. The hours and hours of video footage never showed anything solid.

There were a few occasions when the hairs on Hunter's arms had stood up straight and his skin had turned to goose flesh. Or one time, he thought he heard footsteps in the barn loft when they were chanting Barnaby Hoyt's name. But he could never really prove any of it.

Finally, Hunter came to the conclusion that they weren't capturing any decent evidence because of their low-tech equipment. But that was about to change.

He had just bought a kicked-up digital video camera. And Blake now had a state-of-the-art voice recorder.

Hunter was now convinced they'd be able to pick up all the things that they'd never been able to with the old equipment. They could actually be serious paranormal investigators, Hunter thought. If anything was going to capture a ghost, this stuff would. They had finally joined the 21st century and nothing was going to stop them.

He was ready for his first official paranormal investigation.

So ready.

Chapter 3

It was going to be a great day. Nothing was going to get in the way of that. Not a nightmare. Not a little missed sleep. Not even Austin.

Hunter would have preferred if his mom was driving but it was still kind of cool that Austin was taking them. Even though he could be a real pain in the butt sometimes—like pretty much every waking minute.

Every nightmare comes to an end though, Hunter thought. He felt himself knocking on the door of sixteen. He could almost taste it.

My days are numbered, brocephus. I'll have my license before Christmas.

But in a way, Christmas had come early. They were headed to an old abandoned silver mine just outside of Junction City, about an hour and half away. Hunter was on his way to his first paranormal investigation!

Hunter carefully placed his camera, digital recorder, and a Ouija board inside his backpack.

The Ouija board was something Hunter had read about in books. Even though he had never seen any of the ghost hunters use one on TV, it was supposedly the best old school way to talk to spirits. Hunter had never used one—his inner nerd wouldn't allow it—but he figured he might as well give it a shot. He saw this as a sign of maturity. Being open to things and not so black and white about stuff.

He was clear on his "prime directive," as they said on *Star Trek.* He was determined to make contact with a ghost and capture some sort of proof that they were real. That way, he'd be able to shut his brother up when he made fun of Hunter's obsession with earthbound spirits.

And who knew, maybe if he caught something good enough, Hunter and Blake would be able to have their own TV show someday. Or at least be on their way.

If ghosts existed, Hunter reasoned, then anything was possible.

Having a TV show would be awesome. Hunter could picture himself, going into the darkest and scariest places on earth, capturing it all on tape. Everyone watching, seeing how brave he was.

That would be *sick*, he thought.

Hunter saw Blake coming down the street on his bike.

Blake had red hair and freckles. He looked like one of those baseball players from the 1920's. He was a little stocky and pudgy and had a pug-looking face that scrunched up when he got angry. But that didn't happen too often. Despite the way he looked, Blake wasn't the angry type.

"Hey, man," Hunter said when Blake got to the car. "I thought you might still be sleeping."

"No way, H. I've been up for hours," Blake said, grinning. "I couldn't sleep. I was too excited about today's adventure."

"Me, too, I guess," Hunter said, yawning as he remembered the nightmare.

"You girls just about ready?" Austin said, coming out from the house.

"All ready," Hunter said, le-tting the jab bounce off of him.

Chapter 4

The sun was sharp and bright, already high above the Nevada desert. Hunter watched the arid landscape passing by in a blur out the window. He held a weathered guidebook in his hands, but there was no reason to open it. He'd read through the chapter on Sander's Mine so many times that he knew it by heart.

It was a guidebook he'd found in a used bookstore back in Tule Creek when he was nine years old. It claimed to have all the haunted places in Nevada and included the history behind them. Of the more than 100 ghost towns and haunted places, Sander's Mine had grabbed Hunter's attention the most. Ever since he first read about it, he had wanted to visit the mine.

It had been built in the late 1860s. The hills in the area were crawling with prospectors searching for riches. The mine was the work of a man named Joseph Sanders, who found silver at the spot. Sanders had died in an accident shortly after building the mine when a large boulder fell and struck him in the head, killing him instantly.

Other prospectors picked up where Sanders left off. But the death toll at the mine was high. Unusually high. According to the book, several workers died in cave ins or mysterious accidents. A fire took out six men in 1870. One miner who had barely escaped the flames with his life, told people that right before the accident he saw a fiery red glow coming from the depths of the mine.

And then he heard evil laughter.

That part always sent shivers down Hunter's spine. The laughter part. Like the mine was alive. Like something was down there with the men. Something evil.

It seemed that the mine was cursed, haunted by some malevolent entity that enjoyed killing people. But all the deaths and all the stories didn't keep the miners away.

What eventually drove them off was when the silver ran out. The mine was abandoned for good in 1875, leaving behind a deep and vacant hole on the side of a hill and a little cemetery nearby.

In the 1950s it was turned into a tourist spot with guided tours, but Hunter had never heard of it outside of the book.

All he knew was that it would be the perfect place for a paranormal investigation.

"How much longer till we get there?" Blake yelled from the backseat over the music coming from the stereo.

Austin was cranking Metallica's *St. Anger*, like he always did lately whenever he drove his mom's car. Either that or Ozzy.

"And can you turn that down," Blake said. "It's too early for all this yelling."

"We've still got about 40 miles," Austin said, looking back at Blake in the rearview. "And a spot's just opened up in the trunk for you if you don't like the tunes or the volume."

Blake looked out the window.

Hunter looked at the clock. 9:55. Normally he'd still be in bed at this time.

"So, why don't you ladies explain to me why I'm driving all this way today to get to an abandoned mine in the middle of nowhere?" Austin asked a few minutes later, turning the music down. "I could use a laugh."

Stay cool, Hunter told himself. *Stay cool*.

"People died there in the 1800s," Blake said, leaning forward and resting his arms on the back of Austin's seat. "There's supposed to be some sort of entity in there that kills people."

He was almost as much of an expert on the mine as Hunter. They'd spent hours reading and rereading that guidebook, *Nevada Ghost Towns and Haunts*.

"And you guys really believe that it's haunted?" Austin said.

"That's what we're going to find out," Hunter said. "From what I know, no other ghost hunting crew has been there before. We're the first ones to investigate this place."

"And you guys call yourself a *crew*?" Austin said sarcastically, showing the chipped tooth he'd gotten from football practice a few weeks earlier.

"Well, there's three of us, so, yeah," Hunter said defensively. "We are a crew."

“Hey, there’s two of you, math whiz. I’m not part of your little ghost hunting posse. Get that straight right now. I’m just the driver.”

“I bet you’re just scared,” Blake said, sitting back. “I bet you don’t even have the guts to come into the cave with us.”

“I’m not coming into the cave because I don’t want to waste my time,” Austin said to the mirror. “There’s no such thing as ghosts, and anybody who thinks they exist is plain stupid.”

“Yeah, right,” Hunter said. “What about all those ghost hunters on TV? They’re on TV, so they can’t be all that stupid.”

“Jeez, Hunter, those people take the stupid cake,” Austin said, shaking his head. “I can’t believe you’re so gullible.”

“Wanna know what I think?” Blake said. “I think there’s a big slice of that stupid cake with your name on it.”

Hunter started laughing hard.

“Whatever, man. At least I have a girlfriend and I don’t spend my days chasing after dead people.”

Hunter stopped laughing. It was true. He was secretly in love with Heidi Wyatt. But his dream girl was dating a star football player at school named Josh Crowder. The math added up to *no girlfriend*.

He looked out the window. The brown hills looked blurry from the heat in the distance and the landscape looked exactly the same as it had twenty minutes earlier.

One of these days Hunter was going to prove to Austin that ghosts existed. And then, when he and Blake had their own show on TV, Austin would want in on the ghost hunting crew so bad he’d be begging to join.

Hunter closed his eyes and dreamed of that day.

Chapter 5

"Time for some grub," Austin said, pulling into the McDonald's parking lot in Junction City.

"Good," Hunter said. "I've gotta pee something wicked."

After hitting the bathroom, they ordered breakfast from the girl behind the counter. There was something vacant in her eyes that gave Hunter the creeps. But maybe she was just tired. Hunter would be too if he had to work in this place all day and live his life in a burnt-out town like this.

"Make yourself a nice day," the girl said on their way out.

Hunter shivered. She sure was creepy.

Hunter pulled out the map, tracing the lines with his finger.

"Okay, we're gonna want to make a left coming up here," he said a few minutes later.

Austin nodded. They were soon going down a dirt road, the car shaking and bouncing as it dropped down into a series of Grand Canyon-sized potholes.

Hunter grabbed the backpack at his feet and held onto it. He didn't want any of the equipment getting damaged. After about ten minutes, the road dead ended at a dirt parking lot.

"Finally," Austin sighed.

"This is it?" Blake asked.

"I guess so," Hunter said, looking at the guidebook.

The photos were black and white.

"You sure it's still open?" Austin said.

"Has to be," Hunter said.

Hunter took off his black, Zak Bagans-style, flat-brimmed baseball cap and wiped the sweat from his forehead. It was getting hot.

"Losing your cool already, Vanilla Ice?" Austin said, shaking his head.

"C'mon," Hunter said to Blake. "We're never gonna find anything just sitting here."

They got out of the car.

"All right, you ladies have a nice time," Austin said, grabbing his iPhone from the dashboard and starting up a video game. "I'll be out here in the car. Oh, and try not to lose control of your bowels in there. It's a long drive back home to stew in your own offerings."

Hunter flipped him off and started walking.

"What?" Austin said, smiling. "I was making a valid point."

"Stuff your *valid points* where the sun don't shine!" Hunter said.

After a few minutes, the rolling path led them to a view of a small black hole framed by wooden beams in the side of a hill.

They kept walking and came to an old sign.

"Sanders Mine," Hunter read.

"This is it," Blake said.

"Yeah, this is it," Hunter repeated, looking at the small dark opening, disappointment in his voice.

This wasn't how he had imagined it. He thought the mine would have been a lot bigger. It just seemed like a dark hole. He hoped it would be worth all the driving.

"Hey, that must be the graveyard," Blake said, looking over to the right.

There were some beat-up old wooden crosses about 100 feet away from the cave entrance. The picket fence surrounding the little burial ground was leaning in places, completely missing in others. According to the guidebook, some of the miners' bodies were never found. There was nothing under some of those markers. Not even bones.

Hunter thought it was sad and more than a little creepy.

"Maybe we can take a longer look after we come back out," he said.

"Yeah, maybe there are some spirits hanging around up here," Blake said.

“All right, let’s come up with a game plan,” Hunter said, adjusting his pack. “First, let’s see how far back the mine goes. And then let’s conduct some EVP sessions.”

EVP sessions—for Electronic Voice Phenomena—were when a ghost investigator provoked the spirits and asked them questions, then tried to capture their voices on digital recorders.

“Sounds good,” Blake nodded. “You think it’s really haunted?”

Hunter looked at the dark hole carved out in the hill and sighed.

“It better be.”

Chapter 6

Hunter and Blake went through the small opening and into the mine, pointing their flashlights in front of them. The darkness was overwhelming. Whatever light came through the small opening was immediately sucked away by the cave walls.

And it was cold in there, too. Hunter wished he'd brought a sweatshirt. That would have been a good idea. In all the excitement, he hadn't thought about the temperature of the mine.

But that was okay. Hunter didn't see Zak Bagans going around with a sweatshirt on *Ghost Adventures*. Even when it was cold, he didn't wear long sleeves too often. It was all part of the ghost-hunting persona.

They followed the old wooden boards that ran down the middle of the mine floor.

"How far do you think it goes?" Blake asked, his voice echoing off the walls.

"It was big back in the day," Hunter whispered. "We'll have to see."

As they walked on, Hunter kept his eyes and ears open for anything unusual. Any shadow, any unexplained noise.

The ceiling began to close in on them, getting lower and lower with each step.

"Did you hear that?" Hunter asked, stopping.

It sounded like whistling coming from somewhere behind them.

They were quiet, but didn't hear it again.

"Aw, probably just the wind," Blake said. "We could pretty much debunk that as not being paranormal I think."

"Yeah," Hunter said, sighing. "You're probably right. C'mon. Let's keep going."

It was really getting claustrophobic now. They had to hunch over to avoid hitting their heads.

"Maybe we should turn back," Blake said. "H, I don't like these tight spaces. You know I have a condition."

"No," Hunter said, shaking his head. "Keep your phobia in your pants. We have to keep going. This is part of being a paranormal investigator. Sometimes you have to do things you don't want to do."

After a few more yards, Hunter came across a small opening on the right side of the cave.

"Look, man. It's a room."

The room was big enough to stand up in and Hunter was glad to stretch his back. He pointed his flashlight at the walls.

"Look," Blake said.

The walls were covered with writing. There was modern day graffiti with older chicken scratch showing through underneath. Names had been carved into the rock.

"Joseph Sanders," Hunter said a minute later, tracing his fingers over the only name he recognized. "I wonder what part of the mine he died in."

"Why don't we just ask him?" Blake said.

Hunter grinned. That was one of the awesome things about being a paranormal investigator. If you listened hard enough, the ghosts would answer your questions. It was like that in the shows anyway.

Hunter brought out his camera and turned off the flashlight. He knew that ghosts would be less likely to show up if they had a bright light shining in their faces. Blake did the same with his flashlight. Suddenly there was nothing but blackness all around them.

Hunter switched on the night vision setting and Blake pressed record on his digital recorder, holding it away from him so the spirits could talk into it more easily.

"I want to talk to the spirit of Joseph Sanders," Hunter said in a loud and booming voice.

"Did you die in here, Sanders? Where did you die?"

They were completely quiet. Hunter knew from watching all the episodes of *Ghost Adventures* that sometimes, you couldn't hear the spirits with your own ears. Sometimes only the camera or digital recorder would pick up those faint sounds, and any additional noise would make it more difficult to hear what the spirits were saying.

After a long enough pause, he asked another question.

"Were you a victim of the creature that haunts this mine?"

They were quiet again. They heard nothing. Hunter hoped the equipment was picking up something.

"Are you trapped in here, Sanders?" Blake said.

"Good question, Blakey," Hunter whispered.

He couldn't see, but he knew Blake was probably grinning with pride.

"Hey, don't call me *Blakey* in front of the camera," Blake said.

"Copy that," Hunter said.

They were quiet again, listening for some sort of answer.

But the only reply came from the wind whistling down the shaft.

Blake started speaking in a loud, raspy whisper.

"Dude, do you think we're getting—"

Suddenly, there was a noise coming from somewhere behind them. It sounded like small rocks hitting the ground. Hunter spun his camera around quickly, pointing it in the direction of the noise.

He didn't see any movement, no evidence that anything had fallen or been moved.

But something had.

"I guess we can take that as a *yes* to the question," Blake said.

"Joseph Sanders, are you in here?" Hunter said, not able to contain the excitement in his voice. "That was you, wasn't it? You just made that noise, didn't you?"

Hunter kept his camera pointed at the area where the noise had come from. But there was no response. At least nothing that Hunter could see or hear.

"Dude, I'm getting crazy chills right now," Blake said.

Hunter pointed the camera back at him so he could see him through the night vision. Blake held up his arm to the camera, showing the goose bumps that had broken out all over.

"I feel it, too," Hunter said.

To be honest though, he wasn't completely sure the sensation was caused by an encounter with a paranormal entity or the cold temperature.

They asked a few more questions, leaving long enough pauses for the spirit to respond into the digital recorder. They would review their findings when they got back home.

"All right, I think we've got what we needed in here. Let's keep going down the mine," Hunter said, turning on his flashlight.

"Do we really have to, man?" Blake said. "That ceiling looks like it only gets lower down there."

"Yeah, man. We really do have to," Hunter said, rolling his eyes in the dark. "You go first—face your fears and all that."

Blake sighed.

What was the point of coming here if they didn't explore every part of the mine? Sometimes, Hunter just didn't get Blake. He was like that at school, too. He'd do most of the hard work, reading and studying until he really knew a thing, but then he'd lose interest or something and checkout. He would pass his classes, but just barely. He just didn't finish.

Of course, in here the thing that was causing him to lose interest was his fear.

Well, that would all have to change if they were going to be paranormal investigators, Hunter thought. Blake would have to be thorough. He'd have to learn how to finish things because the investigations and their future fame as reality TV stars depended on it.

A minute later they went back in the mine shaft, crawling on their hands and knees to keep from hitting their heads.

"Dude, I hope the McDonald's food is sitting all right in your stomach because I don't want to be here when, you know, it hits the fan, if you know what I mean," Hunter said from behind Blake.

Blake laughed.

"If that *ends* up being the case, I guess it's a good thing I'm going first," he said.

"Good for you, you mean," Hunter said.

"Yeah, good for me."

Hunter laughed.

"Hey, so did you hear that Heidi Wyatt broke up with Josh Crowder?" Blake said.

Hunter almost stopped dead in his tracks, but played it cool and kept going like he didn't care.

“Oh, really?” he said, no emotion in his voice.

Hunter had had it bad for Heidi for a year now. But he had pretty much given up hope. He knew his video game skills and the *Star Trek* trivia treasure trove between his ears couldn’t compete against a popular running back like Josh Crowder.

“Yeah, so I don’t know. Maybe when we capture evidence of a ghost in here, you can show it to her and she’ll be all like, ‘Hunter, you’re so brave,’” Blake said in a high-pitched voice. “‘Won’t you go out with me?’”

“Shut up, Blakey,” Hunter said. “Focus on how the walls are closing in all around you or something.”

He had thought of the same exact scenario Blake had just described. Except in Hunter’s head, it had all sounded much more believable.

“I’m just saying. Now’s your chance,” Blake said. “She’s available, and being that we’re going to be future reality TV stars, it would behoove her to get in on your action while she still can.”

“*Behoove*? Really, man?”

“Yeah. Behoove. It’s going to be a big word. Just you wait and see.”

Hunter laughed. This was why he hung out with Blake. He had trouble finishing things and suffered from claustrophobia, but Blake was hilarious and fun to be around.

“Hey, are we there yet?” Blake said.

“Stop complaining, man. I see the end right up ahe—”

Suddenly, Hunter heard a voice. A deep, dark, bloodcurdling voice. He dropped his flashlight and was immediately swallowed up by darkness.

“I’m coming for you, Huuunteeerrr,” it said. “You’ve been a very bad booyyy.”

Then Hunter felt something grab his legs. It started pulling him backwards.

Hunter couldn’t help himself. He started screaming, his voice cracking with fear.

“Noooooooooo!”

The hands—or whatever it was—kept pulling, kept dragging him across the dirt floor.

Hunter couldn’t stop screaming.

Chapter 7

The ghost finally let go. Then a loud, evil snicker filled the mine. A second later a flashlight was in Hunter's face. He stopped screaming and squinted, trying to make out the figure in front of him.

He knew that snicker. The recognition turned to uncontrollable rage.

"You sonuvabitch!" he screamed, his anger echoing down the shaft. "Sonuvabitch! Sonuvabitch!"

Hunter lunged for the light shining in his face, toppling Austin over. He started beating on him with his fists.

Austin kept laughing.

"Hey, hey. I was only having fun. Stop it!"

But Hunter didn't stop.

"That's enough, man!" Austin said, pushing his brother off.

"That was such a bastardly move," Blake said from behind them, his voice shaky.

He must have thought it was real too, Hunter thought.

"I didn't mean to make you guys stain your shorts," Austin said, smoothing back his hair. "I just wanted in on the fun. It was getting hot out there in the car."

"Sonuvabitch," Hunter said again, checking his camera to make sure no damage was done in the fight.

"C'mon, don't be such a wuss," Austin said. "Besides, you'd think you'd be happy. I want to see what you guys do exactly during your *investigations*."

Austin made quotation marks in the air with his fingers around the last word.

"Maybe I could hold a camera or something," he said, a devilish grin on his face.

Hunter wanted to start punching him again.

"You don't get to be part of the crew," Hunter said. "You have to earn your way onto our crew."

Austin's laughter echoed all around them.

"And how does one earn their way onto your lame crew?"

"You have to prove yourself," Blake said. "Like doing something really scary on your own."

"Aren't you guys a little old for all this *Ghostbusters* nonsense?"

"You sound scared to me," Blake said. "I bet you don't even have the guts to try out for the crew."

"I so don't want to be on your lame little crew," Austin said. "Thanks very much for the offer, but no."

"Chicken," Hunter mumbled under his breath.

Austin gave him a dirty look, like he'd hit a nerve.

"Fine. What do I have to do to get in your loser club?"

Hunter looked back at Blake. By the look in his eye, they were thinking the same thing. Hunter turned back to Austin.

"You have to stay in that room back there," Hunter said, pointing behind them. "By yourself for 15 minutes. Just you and a digital recorder. No flashlight."

"That's it?" Austin said, yawning. "You couldn't come up with something scarier?"

"People died down here, man," Hunter said. "You don't know what angry spirits are still trapped. You have to capture something paranormal. Otherwise, you're not a part of the crew."

"No such thing, but I'll give it a try only to show you ladies how it's done."

"Fine," Hunter said, slapping the recorder into Austin's hand. "You do know how to use this, right?"

"Duh," Austin said.

He brushed past them in the small cavern, and started crawling back toward where the room was. "I'll see you fools in a few."

"Sonuvabitch," Hunter muttered under his breath.

Chapter 8

"I command you spirits, speak through this board. Tell us why you are still here," Hunter said in a deep voice.

He had set up the camera on a tripod in the corner, along with a digital recorder to capture any unexplained noises or disembodied voices, and they were sitting around the Ouija board on the cold, sandy floor at the end of the mine shaft. Hunter had read in the guidebook that initially the mine had gone on much farther and deeper into the earth's crust. But for safety reasons, they had walled up the remaining parts, making this small room the end of the line.

Hunter and Blake had been at the Ouija board for five minutes. They had their hands carefully placed on the center pointer (the *planchette*, as the instructions called it), waiting to be guided by something.

But so far, there had been no invisible pushing. No guidance.

Hunter looked into the camera.

"Sometimes, the spirits are not always willing to communicate," he said. "You have to be patient and wait for them to come to you."

That part would most likely be edited out of the final video cut. But Hunter thought it might be good to have in case nothing more panned out here.

"Tell us your name," Blake said, closing his eyes.

But the pointer didn't move. Hunter sighed. He'd have to work on his patience in these paranormal investigations. Patience wasn't something that came naturally to him. But he knew that it belonged in the arsenal of any serious investigator.

"This isn't working," Blake whispered under his breath, trying not to let the camera hear the doubt in his voice.

"Take it easy, we just started," Hunter said.

He turned his attention back to the board.

"Did you die here in this mine?" Hunter asked loudly.

Suddenly, the planchette began to move ever so slightly.

"Dude, are you doing that?" Blake said, looking over at Hunter all big eyed.

"No," Hunter said, shaking his head while his hands were slowly guided across the board.

Hunter looked over at the camera.

"The spirits have decided to make contact now," he said, trying to play it cool and contain his smile.

The pointer went over to the *Yes* corner of the board.

"Are you the ghost of Joseph Sanders?" Blake asked.

The planchette started drifting across the board. Blake sounded out the letters for the camera.

"M-I-N-E," he said.

"Tell us if you're Joseph Sanders," Hunter asked. "Or if not, spell out your name."

The pointer began drifting across the board again but soon started swinging wildly all over the place. Hunter couldn't keep up with the letters. Blake looked up, giving Hunter a terrified look.

Then the board piece flew up, crashed against the wall, and landed in the dark sand.

"Whoa, du—" Hunter started saying.

Then the flashlight went out and everything went black.

A spine-chilling scream filled the shaft, echoing down its narrow rock walls. Hunter's heart exploded in his ears.

"Are you there, Blake?" Hunter asked, trying to keep the fear out of his voice.

"Yeah," Blake whispered. "What was *that*?"

"I don't know," he said, suddenly realizing he did.

His eyes grew big.

"Austin!" he shouted.

Hunter fumbled on the ground for his flashlight. He found it and switched it on, but it was dead. Why wasn't Blake turning his on? Hunter reached for where he thought the camera was, knocking it off its tripod. He

grabbed it, turned on the night vision, and looked through it, letting it guide him down the narrow shaft. He crawled on his hands and knees on the cold sand.

"Wait, Hunter!" he could hear Blake saying from behind him. "Wait up."

But Hunter couldn't stop and wait for Blake.

That scream had sounded like a death scream or something. Hunter knew that scream. It had been the same scream he had let loose after falling down the well all those years ago. It was the way he imagined men falling to their deaths screamed.

And it had come from Austin.

He had to find his brother.

"Austin!" Hunter yelled. "Are you okay?"

But there was no answer. The mine was completely silent, except for Hunter's heavy breathing.

He crawled as fast as he could, keeping the camera pointed ahead of him. He finally made it to the small room off to the side of the main shaft. He went in and scanned the ground.

And then he saw it. There was a lifeless figure crumpled in the corner.

It was Austin.

Chapter 9

Hunter ran over to Austin, shaking him.

"Austin!" he shouted. "Austin!"

Hunter thought he was dead. A million thoughts raced through his mind. What was he going to tell their mom? The mine had all been his idea and now his brother had paid the ultimate price for it.

How would Hunter ever be able to live with himself?

"Wake up, Austin!" Hunter cried.

Austin groaned. Hunter's heart skipped a beat. Could it be? Was Austin really alive?

"What hap—"

"We need to get out of here," Hunter said. "C'mon."

Hunter found the digital recorder down in the sand a few feet away and stuffed it in his pocket.

There was no time now to think about what had happened to Austin. All he knew was that he was freaked out of his mind and that he had to get out of there.

Hunter wanted out of this dark hole in the earth. But bad.

He pulled Austin up to his feet. His brother was practically comatose and heavy. Hunter felt a cold blast of air howl past him when they reached the main tunnel. And then he remembered that Blake was still somewhere back there. What was taking him so long?

"Damn it," Hunter said.

He knew he couldn't just leave Blake. Even if Austin was hurt, Hunter couldn't leave his best friend behind. That wasn't what best friends did.

"Blake!" he called out. "Blake!"

There was no answer.

He pointed the camera down the shaft where he had come from. He saw some movement.

"Finally," Hunter said. "There you are."

There was something crawling toward him.

A large, hulking shadow. And it was moving fast. Incredibly fast.

Horror-struck, Hunter realized that the thing coming toward him wasn't Blake.

"Oh, my God!" Hunter screamed, watching the black figure close in.

And that's when he made the executive decision to get the hell out of there.

He pulled Austin's arm over his shoulder and started dragging him as fast as he could. He didn't look back down the shaft. He didn't want to see how close the thing was.

Toward the end, Hunter thought his heart might give out it was beating so fast. Austin would have never known what happened. He was that out of it.

Finally, Hunter saw a burst of light at the end of the tunnel. He had never felt so happy in his entire life, aside from the time when they pulled him out of that well. He picked up the pace, dragging and willing Austin along. And then the light became so strong, it almost blinded him.

Suddenly, they were out in it. In the light and the hot Nevada desert. It all felt so good.

They had made it.

Breathing hard, Hunter dropped Austin onto the warm sand. He fell down on his knees, thankful to be alive. Thankful to be out of the darkness.

It was all good. Except for one thing.

Blake was still in there.

[End of sample. Download *Being Zak Bagans* wherever eBooks are sold.]